Sakurasou no Pet na Kanojo Volume 1

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These are novel illustrations that were included in volume 1.

さくら荘のペットな彼女

俺の住む寮『さくら荘』は、学園の変人たちの集まり。そんな寮に転校早々入ってきた椎名ましろは、可愛くて清楚で、しかも世界的に有名な天才画家だという。

天才美少女を寮の変人たちから守らねば！と意気込む俺だったが、入寮翌日恐るべき事実が発覚する。ましろは、外に出れば必ず道に迷い、部屋はめちゃくちゃ、ぱんつすら自分で選べないし、穿けない、生活破綻少女だったのだ！

そんなましろの“飼い主”に任命された俺。って、服とか俺が着替えさせるの!?これでも俺、健全な男子高校生なんですけど!?　変態と天才と凡人が織りなす、青春学園ラブコメディ登場!!

鴨志田 一
Hajime Kamoshida
イラスト● 溝口ケージ
illustration● Keji Mizoguchi

さくら荘のペットな彼女

電撃文庫

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鴨志田 一

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鴨志田 一

1978年4月11日誕生。神奈川県出身の左利き。好きな色はたぶん青。でもケータイは白を選ぶことが多いらしい。今回ご紹介している写真は、執筆の際にお世話になっている椅子で、長時間座っていても疲れないすぐれものである。

【電撃文庫作品】

神無き世界の英雄伝
神無き世界の英雄伝②
神無き世界の英雄伝③
Kaguya ～月のウサギの銀の箱舟～
Kaguya2 ～月のウサギの銀の箱舟～
Kaguya3 ～月のウサギの銀の箱舟～
Kaguya4 ～月のウサギの銀の箱舟～
Kaguya5 ～月のウサギの銀の箱舟～
さくら荘のペットな彼女

イラスト：溝口ケージ

最近腱鞘炎になりました。絵描きをしているからには仕方がないと思いきや、左手。右利きなのに左手。
これはもしや絵じゃなくてゲームのしすぎなのでは……！

カバー／加藤製版印刷

彼女なアパート

さくら荘の

鴨志田 一
Hajime Kamoshida
イラスト 溝口ケージ
illustration Keji Mizoguchi

「あのなっ！　何かつけろ！　下着的なものを！」

「空太が出してくれなかった」

？

神田空太（かんだ そらた）

水明芸術大学付属高校普通科二年。
拾った猫を捨てられず、
問題児たちの巣窟さくら荘へ入ることに。
面倒見の良さからましろ当番に任命される。101号室の住人。

椎名ましろ（しいな）

編入早々さくら荘へ入ってきた美術科の二年生。
世界的に有名な天才画家だが、
自分でぱんつも選べない常識のなさと、
天然扇情発言で空太を振り回す。202号室の住人。

「ここはいくんが勝つごとに、
あたしが一枚ずつ脱いでいくってルールでどうだ！
目の保養対策も万全だね！　眼福だよ、大興奮だよ！

めくるめく青春の性だよ！
大人の階段上っちゃうよ！
愛欲の連鎖だよ！」

かみいぐさ　みさき
上井草美咲

美術科の三年生で、さくら荘201号室在住。
ここ十年で唯一の特待生と認められた実力者であると同時に、
アニメばかりを作ってその権利を剥奪された変人でもある。

普通科の三年生で美咲の幼なじみ。将来は脚本家を目指しており、
美咲のアニメの脚本を担当している。恐るべき女ったらしでもある。
さくら荘103号室の住人。

三鷹仁（みたか じん）

「で、神田君はいつまでさくら荘にいる気？」

青山七海（あおやま ななみ）

普通科の二年生で、空太のクラスメイト。
高校のかたわら養成所に通って声優を目指している。
生活費や養成所の授業料をバイトで稼ぐ頑張り屋さん。

「このつまらん現実よりは、幾分ましだろ」

「進路調査なんて適当にパイロットって書いておけばオッケーよ」

千石千尋（せんごく ちひろ）

さくら荘で監視要員として暮らす美術教師。
合コンに命をかける、自称二十九歳と十五ヶ月。
ましろの従姉妹でもあり、世話を空太に押し付ける。

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デザイン●T

Prologue

One day, when we are adults, what will we think of when we recall our memories at Sakurasou[1]?

Will we lament over everyone's stupidity?

Or will we reminisce about those boisterous and joyful days first?

I couldn't think of anything other than these two possibilities.

That's because every day we've spent here was certainly awesome.

Chapter 1: Welcome to Sakurasou

1

When he opened his eyes, a white and perfectly round butt was right in front of his eyes.

"Hikari, is it you again?"

After calling her name, she snuggly purred as she scratched her ears.

Kanda Sorata paid no attention and pushed Hikari's butt off his face. He then stood up from the gray carpet. Hikari, who was woken up forcibly by Sorata protested, but Sorata only sighed in response.

"What a tragedy..."

Sorata squinted his eyes as he glanced at the bright sky outside the window. The west side of the horizon burnt deep red as if informing him of the approach of armageddon.

"Waking up to a cat's butt... How tragic can my youth be?!"

Sorata covered his face as a sudden faintness rushed onto him.

"Maybe using the word 'youth' casually is even more tragic..."

The white cat on his lap yawned as if agreeing with him. After that, the six other cats in the six-tatami[2]-sized room started to sing in unison, yearning for food.

There was a white cat, a black cat, a calico cat, a brown striped cat, a black striped cat, a Siamese, and a cat that looked like the American short-hair cat. In total there were seven cats which were all once abandoned and now brought back and cared for by Sorata. He also named them systematically: Hikari, Nozomi, Kodama, Tsubasa, Komachi, Aoba, Asahi[3].

To these hungry mouths, the only response Sorata could give was the growling sounds of his tummy, 'your master is also hungry'.

This was the last day of his spring holiday. The 5th of April. 5:00 P.M..

This worn-out apartment building, dyed crimson by the setting sun, was a dormitory of the high school affiliated with the Suimei University of Arts.

It was named Sakurasou[4], most likely due to the large sakura tree in the courtyard.

The kitchen, the dining room, and the bathroom were all shared.

It would take ten minutes to walk to school as well as to the closest station.

Room 101, one of the dormitory's rooms, was the hideout of Kanda Sorata, starting this spring a second-year student.

The wall was labelled with clear words: "My goal: Escape from Sakurasou!". Words that reflected Sorata's first thoughts this year before he had written them down.

His target now was neither to have a girlfriend, nor was it to get into Koshien[5], certainly not to get into the National Stadium, definitely not to get to Inter High[6]. It was to leave this dormitory.

The reason was that Sakurasou was a bit different from the normal dormitories.

Here students lived, who couldn't get along with other students, and it was a place for them to change. Simply put: This was a hideout for problematic people. Unlike other dormitories, there were no matrons or cafeterias here, so everything ranging from cooking, doing the laundry, to cleaning up had to be done by the students here, which was very troublesome. The school officials said it was to 'facilitate the independence of students', but Sorata thought the reason was that the school couldn't find anyone willing to come here to help.

After all, Sakurasou had the potential power to scare even friends away when mentioned.

Something the monthly, mandatory clean up activities outside of school were even more troublesome. As its name implied, it was to volunteer walking around and clean up the trash in the vicinity of the school ground. But because the 'vicinity' of the university ground took at least thirty minutes for even adults to walk across, this was a large project that could take up a whole day. His leg muscles would always ache terribly the day after the activity.

Both boys and girls lived together in this notorious dormitory, adding up to currently four students. There was also a teacher responsible for supervising them.

Sorata was one of the students.

Last summer he was called in by the principal in person and was forced to make a decision.

"Kanda Sorata-kun, either throw away your cat or move out of the dormitory."

"I'll move out of the dormitory then."

Sorata was in his rebellious age; thus, he declared this before the principal even finished what he was saying. As a result, he was kicked out from normal dormitories that day.

Only after that did he realize he had made a huge mistake at the most crucial point in his life. He immediately called a meeting in his brain to debate over who was supposed to shoulder this responsibility. The conclusion was his prefrontal lobe[7].

After Sorata had been sent away, Mitaka Jin said to him with a sharp-tonged response to his tragedy: 'The

white cat Hikari is the only cat you are keeping. If you work hard to find someone who will adopt it, then the problem of your accommodation should be solved.' However, it struck Sorata so hard he couldn't recover from the shock for a total of three days.

Thus, he was still trying to recruit people who will adopt his cats.

But for some strange reason, after a few months the number of cats didn't decrease but increased instead. Sorata thought something had to be wrong.

As if cursed, Sorata would meet abandoned cats wherever he went. There was nothing he could do about this misfortune. He once tried to pretend to not see the cats, but as soon as he had taken a couple of steps away from the paper box, he gave in to his guilty feelings and uneasiness.

Nozomi, Kodama, and Hikari snuggled up to him, perhaps worried about Kanda who was deep in his thoughts.

"Don't stick so close to me. I'm going to find feeders now. When we part, I'll surely cry and look terrible, and you guys will back off."

The cats turned away and started to lick their faces. Sorata wondered if they understood what he just said.

He sighed and faced towards the dark red sky.

Couldn't I have a more meaningful last day of spring holidays to recover from my holiday blues? Bathing in the sunset, he laughed hollowly.

At this moment a feminine voice came from the back of the bed.

He held his frustration in and turned his head towards the source.

He remembered why he was sleeping on the hard floor.

He had always slept in his bed and it was his favourite for sleep. But right now a beautiful teenage girl was sleeping in his bed like a baby. The girl's mouth was in the shape of a kitten's, as if she was plotting something. In short: She was the queen of the cats. She looked healthy, pure, and glamorous, like an American shorthaired cat. Her skirt revealed her tender thighs munificently. One could clearly see her cleavage between

the open buttons of her shirt that was accentuated by the squeezing of her arms.

If Sorata had seen this wonderful scene one year ago, he would have most likely started to drool and cry dismally and recklessly in a ridiculous manner.

Yet, having lived in Sakurasou for more than a half year, he couldn't be provoked by such things anymore.

"Misaki-senpai[8]. It's time to wake up."

After he bore his own waver and called upon the sleeping one, Kamiigusa Misaki got off the bed and gently stretched herself like a wild animal.

Her shirt was pulled up, showing the small, curved line of her hip that would entice one to rush and embrace it, and a cute belly that was quite hard to see. And inconceivably, even her bed hair emphasized Misaki's cuteness. If she were to pass behind ten people, every one of them would definitely turn their heads to glimpse at her.

Her basic information was also overwhelming— Her height was 156 centimetres and her weight was 46

kilograms. Her BWH[9] were 87, 56, and 85— The final product in terms of a third-year high school student.

Misaki emitted her glamour naturally as she opened her eyes wide at Sorata.

"~In the future, I want to become a bride~"

"Please leave your sleep-talk for when you are in your dreams. This is this world's rule."

"~Then, I'll be the bride and you'll be my hubby. Let's start acting out the part right after you get home from work~"

"Why is this like the formula of a crosstalk[10]!"

"~You're back, honey. You're quite early today~"

"Are you seriously playing that now?!"

"~Do you want a meal? A bath? Or a sumo wrestler's loincloth~?"

"What kind of place is this for a sumo stable[11]?"

"~Or a scrubbing brush~?"

"Won't you just directly say you want to eat 'me'[12]?! Will someone even call her husband to scrub the bathtub right after he arrives home?"

"~Even sloths are in high spirits when they copulate, aren't they~?"

"You're changing the topic too fast!"

"~Your reactions are too slow. In the sense that our friendship is so close, you must catch up with me~"

Misaki pointed at Sorata, added a love symbol to her suffix, and winked at him as if lecturing a mischievous child.

How can someone who has just woken up be in such high spirits?

"Anyways, good morning. Also, I've said countless times that you have to sleep in your own room."

"~A female would never give in if you skimp on her~"

"Are you still continuing with that sloth topic?!"

"~It'll be depressing to see her unsatisfied and frustrated~"

"Females are unresponsive, too, so they and I are alike. "

Sorata gave up at last and started to answer her normally:

"Then we'll take up where we left off yesterday."

However, Misaki gave no heed to what they had just talked about and began to arrange things in front of the television. She grabbed the game console and turned on the power. After a few beeping sounds, the system began to operate, reading the ROM with knocking sounds.

But Sorata turned off the power before the menu came up.

"Hey~, what are you doing?!"

Misaki puffed her cheeks in protest. The angry look of her's was pretty cute; and that along with her eyes that were tilted slightly upwards, one could not help but to show a smile.

Yet, he shouldn't be fooled.

"Where did that sloth go?"

"Eh, but that topic is dull."

"But it was you who raised it!"

"Then let's play some video games."

"You've used the wrong conjunction! Besides: Yesterday, or the day before yesterday to be exact, we played video games until I've almost died. Specifically, we've played for a total of thirty-six hours! I feel like puking just by looking at the screen today! My eyes are

rotting away! If I'm poisoned by the electromagnetic waves emitted from the television for one more moment, I'm sure I'll turn into sand or salt!"

The reason why he woke up on the floor was because he played video games for so long he dozed off in the middle of it.

Misaki turned on the power again.

"Okay. Then every time you win I'll strip off one piece of clothing. How's that?! With that, the counter-measures for the preservation of your eyes are flawless! Eye-candy! Excites your blood and nerves! The dazzling nature of youth! It's the stage where you jump right into being an adult! It's the chain of lust!"

"Compared to you taking off your clothes, peeling onions would be better for increasing the blood flow in my spongy muscle[13]."

"It's because you're thinking 'Wa! There's something white coming out!', aren't you? I must not underestimate you. However, being excited by vegetables should be limited to people below the second year of middle school . Vegetarian boys won't do. You must devour your food

ravenously. Indeed, what high school students need is meat! Meat! Come, Kouhai[14]-kun, let's travel to the world of hunger for meat! Yeah!"

As Misaki spoke, she puffed out her bosomy breasts, shaking her breasts under her shirt like pudding cakes. Owing to his lamentable male nature, Sorata couldn't help staring at them.

Despite this, Sorata still tried resisting it with all his might.

"I can't think of senpai as a girl when she has this undisguised, shameless character! Let me off the hook this time, please! Please stop revealing your unnecessary cuteness, or else I will become distrustful of women! Please!"

"We've finally overcome the predicament of our genders and have become good friends. Grats, man! Let's celebrate today by playing video games until the sun rises!"

"This isn't anything worth congratulating! What have you experienced and learnt that made you arrive at such a conclusion?! You're an alien! Please go back to your own planet!"

During spring break, Sorata was forced to stay with Misaki constantly each night until the sun had risen. After that, he would slumber his days away. So he hoped he would have a more stable and tranquil day today.

"Is this all you want to say?!"

"If you think this is all I have to say, then you're completely wrong! Hey, you, senpai! You've been too self-centred! Don't you think this is a liberal country?!"

"Then let's end this with a video game! Let's kick off a battle of blood for blood until one of us is eliminated, otherwise, this battle won't end!

"It's my pleasure... No! I've already said I'm not going to play video games today!"

Sorata thought Misaki would get angry and glare at him, but instead she swiftly took out the ROM from the game console and inserted a sample disc, completely neglecting what Sorata was saying.

"~Humph! Forget it, forget it. If you hate playing video games that much, then help me by having a look at my sample video~"

The screen showed the five-second countdown scene like in old films.

"Might this be your new work?"

"~I edited it the morning before yesterday, so it's freshly picked. Please enjoy yourself~"

"I've really been through some rough time, so this has cost me concentration..."

After the last second of the countdown, an original anime produced by only Misaki was shown on the TV. There were neither voices, music, nor the sounds of special effects because the anime hadn't been dubbed. Nevertheless, it had a good flow, vibrancy, and extreme audacity. She even blended 2D characters in the 3D

background, presenting the perfect harmony of modern images. The characters and the backgrounds were also drawn exquisitely and meticulously. The storyboard had an adequate rhythm and the composition was unique. The troublesome drawings should have directly challenged the limits of using up gallons of calories... It was hard to imagine this was made by one person —Of course this was not the quality of a layman, but those that transcend even the quality of first-class animators.

The high school affiliated with the Suimei University of Arts (often shortened as Suiko) has not only the general classes that Sorata belonged to, but also music and art classes aimed at a handful of elites. These elites came from around the country. They had to have sky-rocketing results in order to enter the school against an incredibly tough acceptance rate.

And Misaki was one of them. She was a third-year student of arts.

She was the only one eligible to receive a scholarship in arts in the past ten years, though, she was also the one deprived of this right due to to her continuous efforts in making cartoons and anime. This made her extremely famous in the school.

"Splendid."

Misaki made no response to Sorata's comment that anyone would say and was busy making the sounds and effects with her mouth beside Sorata.

"~Bang! Bang! Clang! Hack! Ha, Hahahahaha. 'Your fate has come!' Clang. Hack. Ting. Dadala. Dang. Dang. Dang. 'You're too naive. The only thing you could do is to lie!', 'W-What are you saying?', 'Take off your panties and start over again. You immature and inexperienced kid!' Fufu lalalalala... Dang Dang~!"

Yet, Misaki's enthusiastic performance was completely irrelevant to the video.

What kind of unfathomable world is her mind creating?

At the same time when Misaki gradually calmed down , the screen dimmed out.

The five-minute video was so splendid it felt as if it was a few times longer.

"~The work I have to do to remake this is beyond my expectations~"

Misaki took out the ROM as if one could hear her dismay and disappointment. Even though she said a lot of nonsense, she finished what she had to —This was certainly amazing.

"I can't see anything that needs remaking."

"~Kouhai-kun. You're too naive. The real battle begins right after you think you have completed something. The enemy is in your heart~!"

"Oh, is that so?"

"~Ah. Right. Do you think I can find Nanami-chan to help me to dub this~?"

What she meant by Nanami-chan was Aoyama Nanami, a first-year in the same class as Sorata. Her dream was to become a voice actress in the future, and hence was now taking lessons for that. She said in her career choice survey that she wanted to enter the university's drama department. On a side note: She was quite reserved with the nickname 'Nanami-chan'.

Perhaps because of the unique environment of the high school affiliated with the Suimei University of Arts, many students had already set sights on their goals and were striving to achieve it.

In Sakurasou, there was also a third-year who was aiming to enter the Literature and Arts Department as he wanted to be a scriptwriter. There was also a second-year , who was already doing work related to game programming, who said that he wanted to enter the Media department.

Unlike other students who already had clear goals, Sorata handed his career choice survey in with nothing written on it. He was called to the staff room after school that day and got it back as his spring homework.

On a side note, Misaki, one year above him, wrote in her career choice survey 'it's too gleaming, I can't see it' and was also called to the staff room where she got three times what Sorata received in lecturing, though the teacher who scolded her recieved the full force of Misaki's counterattack of alien words and hence was spiritually wounded so seriously, she now retired from her job with no plans to return. This was the second time

that one of Misaki's grade-school teachers was inflicted with an incurable trauma because of her - poor teachers.

"It's fine with me asking her to help."

"~Then it's all your's, remember to also help with the recording work~"

"You'll have to buy me a meal in the student cafeteria."

"~No problem~"

In fact, this was certainly no problem for Misaki. Even if she had to pay for his meals for a whole year, she wouldn't be bothered in the least.

That was because the thirty minute anime she uploaded to an anime website last summer was a complete success, receiving favourable criticism instantly and receiving over a million views. Companies rushed to her in order to discuss commodification matters regarding the work. The DVD that set sale early this January sold over a hundred thousand times, as if it was jeering at the dull economy. He once peeked at her account savings and saw a number that was enough for her to just sit back and have fun for the rest of her life.

The script for the anime was written by Mitaka Jin, Misaki's childhood friend who also lived in Sakurasou.

The story happened in an artificial island faraway from earth. It was a science fiction tale beginning with a quiet young boy who lived on the island encountering a young girl outside the island.

At first their relationship was a success, but it was too successful, and became a bit dull. The young boy had no feelings of agony, so the girl had to take the initiative to confess and start getting along with each other. The girl also directed their first kiss - the boy felt neither pain, nor was he hurt.

However, there was something mysterious around them that lead to a huge turning point in the middle of the story.

One day, the boy found out that the world he lived in was 'a complete lie'. He didn't live on earth, but an artificial island, a large-scaled island that floated in the universe. The earth he once thought he lived in had become uninhabitable because of the terrible wars that humans had started.

The boy realised that he had been ignorant of it all the sixteen years he had lived. He had thought he lived on earth, but it was all a complete lie. And it wasn't the only lie. His parents weren't even his real parents - his classmates knew about it, but they still lied to him. So was the existence of the girl - a lie which had deliberately been planned for the boy. All these sixteen years he lived a life according to a script someone wrote.

It was the world government. To put an end to the never-ending battles, they fabricated a plan called ' Noah's Ark'. It was supposed to cultivate children that would be insensitive to pain, sorrow, hate, and anger, or in other words, to remove the fighting instinct within mankind. The artificial island was this ark, and the boy was their guinea pig in this experiment.

Their plan succeeded in a way. The boy didn't know what to do when he was confronted with the truth. He just panicked and shivered at his terror. At last he lost his mind and went mad, as he couldn't face the conflict in his mind. He couldn't help but destroy everything that he saw - destroying the world that he had been living and manipulated in - setting the artificial island on fire.

When the world government decided to exterminate the boy, only the girl came back to the boy. The girl wanted to protect him, who was surrounded by the army , but she was shot through her chest and died serenely in the boy's arms.

Only after the girl died, did the boy realize that there was also something which was real, in this world filled with lies. It were the feelings that he had for the girl, and the gentleness the girl had in all of her interactions with him.

At this moment, the boy wept for the first time in his life. They were tears of sorrow, miraculously forming a classic scene of warmth that carried away the audience.

Sorata had also shed tears when he saw it for his first time - he was completely defenseless against the plot that was brought to its greatest by its superb performance.

This was a work Misaki created all by herself. Every setting, concept, storyboard, composition, first drawings, animation, colouring, the background and its synthesis, photographing, after-effects, cutting, recording, audio

mixing, and even video editing work that should be done by different workers from different departments together , had all been by Misaki.

She was not only good at 2D, but also 3D - She created special performances that integrate both her skills and taste.

Even though the audio and the sounds had been handed to her friends that studied music, Misaki still had to finish a lot of work all by herself and at an inconceivably high standard.

The anime she created made Sorata feel deep in his heart that god was unjust — Misaki had been gifted with such an abnormal talent, yet he had been gifted with nothing.

"Alright! Let's do the remake work now!"

Misaki stood up, stretched herself. She then lost interest in Sorata and ran out of the room. Sounds of running up the stairs wheezed in the dormitory, followed by sounds of Misaki walking above the ceiling. As a matter of fact, Sorata was now right below Misaki's room.

"I must get out of here before I lose my common sense. .."

"I'm intruding."

"Sorry for intruding."

Sengoku Chihiro, the art teacher who put on makeup carefully and dressed herself up for a battle, appeared in front of the door. She was responsible for supervising the residents, such as Sorata, in Sakurasou. She also happened to live with them. However, she didn't take her role serious at all. "Wuugahh! That's some heavy makeup! You've surpassed the night butterfly[15] and have become a moth!"

"Sorata. You're only a kid, you don't understand an adult's appeal."

That being said, Sengoku balefully winked, and it was as if her mascara was making a shutter sound.

Sorata bore his nausea and tried his best to draw a stiff smile in response.

"Anyways, I've given you my advice."

"I'm going to find my future husband today, you'll see."

"So you're here to tell me that?"

"Why would I have to report such things to you?"

"I don't want you to report to me such things either."

"You're just a kid who likes to talk back. Here. This is for you."

She took out a photo with a girl of about 5 to 6 years of age on it.

"Is this your illegitimate daughter?"

"She is my cousin who is going to live here starting today."

"Okay."

"Her name is Shiina Mashiro. We're going to meet at the station right at six, so please go get her for me at that time."

"What?"

"I said we're going to meet at the station right at six, so please go get her for me at that time. Could you hear me now?"

"It's because I've heard you that I'm asking what you're talking about!"

"I'm going to the mixer later. A doctor, yeah, a doctor! This is a hard-to-get kind of target. Look, I've got something important that I can't miss! However, look at you, you've got spare time, right? Your face is full of 'I've got a lot of spare time'."

"And you're saying words that a teacher should refrain from saying. You sure are in a good mood again today. How respect-worthy are you? However, I can't help you today, because I have to figure out what I want to do with my life by tomorrow."

"What are you talking about?"

"It was you who said I needed to hand in the career choice survey!"

"Oh, all you need to do is to write something like 'pilot'."

"I'm not in elementary school anymore!"

"'A rich man' would also be fine."

"Isn't that worse?!"

"You're such a stingy boy. If you can't think of anything no matter what, then just write 'receive further education', and the teachers in the staff room are satisfied ."

"Can't you ask Jin to do it? He's also free."

"That 'Emperor of Sleepovers' isn't here. Today, he's probably using that handsome face that he is so proud of and his energetic lower-half to take some random lady to heaven."

"Are you seriously a teacher? Have some of the self-awareness of a person who has such a sacred duty! Jeez!"

"The self-awareness of someone with a sacred duty? I've left that in my father's testicles a long time ago."

"Wuahh! How scary! That's the first time I've ever heard the word testicles coming from a female. As

expected of someone with their age over 30. People at the level of female Amazon warriors sure have unbelievable strengths."

Chihiro's eyebrows twitched.

"Who's thirty years old?! I'm still twenty-nine and fifteen months!"

She stamped the floor so hard it quaked. Feeling the potential hazard, Sorata gave up about saying what he was about to say: 'You certainly are a female Amazon warrior'.

"How about Akasaka? He must be here, isn't he?"

Sorata looked at the wall of a room. In the room with the number 102 lived a programming designer in the same grade as him, Akasaka Ryuunosuke.

"There's no way that shut-in would come out! Please have some common sense when you talk. Ahh, I'll be late if I don't head out now! I'm leaving my cousin to you. Remember to take care of it for me!"

Chihiro opened the door vigorously in a terrifying manner. At the same moment, a hinge loosened, and the

door hung askew. One of the cats purred to comfort Sorata, telling him how meaningless it was for him to tighten the loose hinge.

Sorata glared at the traces of Chihiro and tried to use his psychic powers to send her something along the lines of 'you're going to fail in your mixer'.

After that, he picked up his phone that was on the floor and messaged Ryuunosuke.

He received a reply at an amazing speed.

「*Master Ryuunosuke is currently developing a middleware for S company that is used to compress sound. It sounds boring , but he still continues to do it because of the sense of responsibility he has for the job. So, even though it is Sorata's message, I'm sorry that I can't forward it to master Ryuunosuke. Sorry for the inconvenience. I hope you understand. — The maid who is also responsible for secretary work*

The maid was an AI Ryuunosuke developed which could reply to messages automatically. Though Sorata was uncertain of how it was developed, it was surprisingly emotional and inconceivably smart. Even

though it was only capable of everyday words, and even misspelt some words, its replies were still accurate and fitting.

And it was very interesting. Sorata would talk to her about life, practice dating a girl and whatnot when he had nothing to do.

Nevertheless, he had no time today for a game of trading messages with the electronic maid.

He sent a message again, hoping for a response.

This time he got a reply within a second.

「*If you keep being irrational, then you'll get punished. The punishment for being too annoying is a virus I'm about to send to you. (Giggles) — The maid who is also capable of making viruses*

"Oh shit!"

Frightened of what might come, Sorata immediately sent another message to explain to it.

He got hold of himself before he really got sent a program that would damage the system of his phone, turning his new phone intro trash.

「*It's great that you understand. What a waste of not being able to use the virus I prepared strenuously. — The maid who wishes to soon become a human*

Thinking of the AI, Sorata sent another message in apology.

When he was in the middle of typing the message, he sighed.

"Alas, the students and teachers here are all freaks. If I don't get away from here, something bad might really happen. I might also go nuts... When can I return to my normal life again? Who can save me?"

Then he looked at the photo he just got in detail.

It was a fair girl wearing a large straw hat and dressed in a completely white western-style dress. There was no expression on her face— She didn't even smile to the camera. Her transparent eyes looked as if they were looking at somewhere beyond the camera.

A pain came over Sorata's heart as he looked at the photo. He wondered if it was because of the misty and cloudy feeling of a broken object that photo gave him.

The girl looked very similar to something.

A cat purred.

"...Yep, she looks just like you guys ages ago."

He looked at the cat that was brushing between his feet. Imagining a girl looking up at him from inside a cardboard box, with this in mind the sense of devastation it brought to almost caused him to pass out.

2

The quickest way from Sakurasou to the station was through the 'Red Brick Strip Mall'. It was a fabulous, retro style, and historical place. Being born and raised here, Sorata remembered this street as one of the places he played around when he was small. As such, most of the people here greeted him as he went through the streets.

The fishmonger would say:

"Oh, aren't you Kanda's boy? The mackerel is great today."

The proprietor of the butchery up at the far front would say:

"Yaaahaaa, are you Sorata? What do you want to buy today? I can give you a croquette, it's on the house."

Sorata didn't buy anything, but he took the croquette offered by the kind lady.

"Sorata, I haven't seen you in ages. The school you're now in is Suiko, isn't it?"

That was his friend from middle school who was looking after the vegetable shop right now.

Neighbourhood bonds which are missing in urban cities still existed in this street.

Perhaps redeveloping this street wouldn't profit anyone much. Besides: Everyone liked the city of the Suimei University of Arts the way it was.

Around three years ago, there opened a new big supermarket that offered a cheap and large variety of

products. However, Sorata still loved this strip mall. It was a comforting place for him.

And it was this kind of feeling that others who lived around here who supported the strip mall until now also had.

Stuffing his mouth with the croquette, Sorata arrived at the station before he realized it.

Even though the station was named the Arts University Station, it took even adults fifteen minutes to walk from here to the university. Every year there would be unknowing students who rushed here at the last minute, would fall victim and lament at their misfortune. This had become a famous story around here.

There was only one barrier in the station, so residents on the other side had to walk across the level crossing to buy tickets, which was extremely inconvenient.

Sorata waited on the steely, round fence that was in front of the barrier.

He took out the photo in his wallet and had a look at the girl again.

Her name is Mashiro Shiina.

What a strange name.

Chihiro had said she was her cousin, but their age difference seems huge.

When he was thinking over this, the next train had entered the station.

Normally middle and high school students would get off the train in groups around this time, which was after school. However, it was spring break now. There were only a handful unidentified passengers from whom one couldn't guess their ages and what they do by the way they looked like.

Yet, Sorata recognized one face out of the few. The owner of the face also recognized him. He widened his eyes in surprise and walked to him with light steps.

"What are you doing here? You aren't waiting for me, are you?"

"No."

"Of course not."

Mitaka Jin smiled. Sorata didn't think there was anything funny though.

Jin had brown hair, was tall and slim. One could sense his daringness when near him, but tenderness was what he exuded overall.

The clean and shiny glasses he was wearing gave an intellectual impression. He was flawlessly handsome, even in Sorata's opinion.

This was why Sorata could understand why he was so popular. It wasn't surprising to see a kiss mark on his neck, this was everyday business.

Jin lived in Sakurasou's room 103. His speciality was to guess the BWH of clothed women.

"What are you holding in your hands? It's very aromatic."

Jin pried into the small bag of croquettes. The curiosity of a child appeared on his face, despite his unflustered and mature manner.

"It's the croquettes the butchery gave me on my way here."

"How great. Please give me some. I've only eaten breakfast today."

Jin stuffed his mouth with croquettes, looking like he was eating them with a gusto.

"You're fabulous, Sorata."

"Eh?"

"You can already get such delicious croquettes just by walking through the strip mall. What a genius you are. You have my respect."

"You're more fabulous as you can make females pregnant just by walking through the road."

"Hey. I've used good preventive measures."

"And isn't Misaki-senpai's anime well-received?"

Jin wrote the script of the anime after all.

"That's just because it was made by Misaki. She was a freak since long ago. Mmm... It's tasty. I love the croquettes here."

Perceiving that Jin wanted to change the subject, Sorata stopped digging further with his question.

"I will give my thanks to the lady who gave me the croquettes later. Let me tell her that you were the one who praised her."

"Right. You're a resident here."

"Yes."

"Then why do you still have to live in the dormitory?"

"Why would you come up with that question at this time? But never mind, it's nothing special."

It happened around a year ago. It was the day when he got his results of his high school examinations.

Sorata couldn't even dream that he would be accepted into a university. To celebrate it, he went to karaoke with his friends, singing and playing around ecstatically.

Singing until midnight and coming home after that, he was greeted by his father who was standing in the living room like the Nryana[16].

"You are already a high school student. I think I'll give you the right to choose."

"What?"

"Either come with us to Fukuoka, or stay here alone."

What his dad said as he crossed his arms in front of his chest was completely inconceivable.

Sorata looked helplessly at his mum who was washing dishes while humming a song.

"Well, I've suddenly been transferred to a new place for work."

"Okay. And so?"

"So you'll have to choose to come with us or stay here."

"Wait. Aren't you going there by yourself?"

"What are you talking about? Son, if I do so, I'll be lonely."

"You should refrain from speaking of disgusting things like loneliness, dad!"

"And so, I'll also bring mum and Yuuko with me."

"Why don't you bring me too?"

"Because you being here or not has no effect on whether I'm lonely or not."

"Oh, is that so? How about Yuuko's school?"

"She has changed school's already."

"That's too fast!"

Nevertheless, Sorata didn't mind. He could have the life of independence he wanted at last.

"By the way, I've gone to a real estate agent and have decided to sell this house."

"Wait! You've decided way too fast!"

"I've already decided to end my life in a world filled with Mentaiko[17]."

"Have you gone nuts?! Wake up! What's a world filled with Mentaiko? Apologise to Fukuoko immediately! There are much more good things there!"

"Calm down. I support the Hawks[18].

"Who cares?!"

"Mum, I can't take it anymore. I certainly can't talk to my son in puberty. I never knew puberty was this tricky. "

"Wait a moment! Why do you want to end our conversation like it was all my fault?!"

His father left and entered the bathroom in a hurry, seemingly not wanting to talk anymore. But Sorata didn't want to run after him. After all, who would want to see their father naked?

His mother then sat in front of him.

"So, what are you going to do? This is a choice of a lifetime."

"Is the school's promotion leaflet still here? How much does it cost to live in the dormitories?"

"It says it costs fifty thousand yen for breakfast and dinner."

His mother had an evil smile on her face.

"Dammit. There will still be a way if I go to work or something."

"Eh. Why? Why? Why isn't Onii-chan[19] coming together with us?"

His sister Yuuko in pink, childish pajamas interrupted suddenly.

She grabbed Sorata by the hand and cried: 'Why? Why ?' Then she rolled on the floor.

"I wanna be with you, Onii-chan. Don't you care about being separated from me? How unbelievable!"

Sorata's sister was going to be in her second year of middle school this April, but the childishness in her was worth of worrying. The condition of her body was weak since long ago, and as a result she had always depended on Sorata to protect and care for her. And hence the first one that would disagree with his dad's transfer would be his sister.

"I don't want to give up the school I tried so hard to get in, too."

"Your only motivation to get into that school was because it was the closest one to our house! Then finding the nearest school in Fukoako would make up for it! After all, your motivation is impure!"

After that, Yuuko still didn't want to give in. She continuously tried to persuade Sorata, trying to take him with her no matter what.

Yuuko looked at Sorata's unwavering gaze and almost cried. Sorata felt extremely uneasy about this. At last, Yuuko became silent due to her mother's words:

"Very well. Stop being so headstrong, otherwise your brother will hate you."

She had been her mother for thirteen years after all. She knew how to deal with her.

"I understand... I'll give up on Onii-chan then..."

Yuuko returned to her room, with eyes that looked like a pony being sold.

The next day, Sorata had finished the procedures for the admission to Suiko and for living in the dormitories. On the other hand, his family was busy preparing to move.

This had only been a year ago, but Sorata felt like it happened much longer ago.

When he reached the climax, Jin was laughing his head off.

"What an enviable family you have."

"It's all because of my stupid father."

"But at least it wasn't because of any serious reason. I didn't prepare for any tragic stories."

"Like my family breaking apart, or my father missing?"

"Right."

Jin smiled candidly. He must have used this face to take down women, Sorata thought.

"So, what are you doing here?"

"Ah, this."

Sorata showed the photo he got from Chihiro to Jin.

"What an adorable girl."

"Yes."

"She's around five, isn't she?"

"I think so too."

"Is she your sister?"

"No, she isn't."

"Yeah. Okay. I understand."

"What do you understand?"

"Go to the police, Sorata. Admit that you are a pedophile. And then tell them you're the instigator of the perverted things that were alleged here. I'll go with you."

"Why are you saying that with such a serious face?! That's not what I meant! It was only the teacher who wanted me to go to the station to welcome this girl!"

"What? Is that what happened? How boring."

"Do you think it is more interesting if I'm a pervert?"

"It's more interesting than this boring reality we're in, isn't it?"

Sorata couldn't determine how serious Jin was by saying these words with this expression.

After their dumb conversation ended for a while, a black taxi drove into the circle and stopped at a taxi station about ten metres away from Sorata.

Sorata accidentally caught a glimpse of a young girl wearing the familiar Suiko uniform in the back seat.

It was a new uniform, as she didn't quite seem to be used to wearing it. She held a brown suitcase in her hands and looked out at the taxi that left with a bored expression.

The slight, phoenix coloured eyes gave her a bit of a mature appearance. Still, she should've been in the same generation as Sorata because she was wearing the same kind of uniform.

Her permeable white skin seemed to dye her surroundings white.

Being deeply captivated by this magnificent scene, Sorata fixated his eyes on her, blocking out everything else on his mind, and only having an endless white world in his heart. He gradually started to be unable to see other things around her, and it became difficult to breath. He even forgot where he was at this moment.

The young girl looked as if she was standing on a large glacier alone. Sorata had become the slave of such a misperception.

"That girl looks unique. Am I right, Sorata?"

"[...]"

"Sorata?"

Sorata felt that Jin did say something, but he didn't pay attention to hear what it was.

The girl walked up to him slowly and quietly. If one was to use a cat to describe her, she would be like an Iriomote cat[20]... She had an abundant inside and gave off a strong sense of existence, yet also had a dangerous ambience around her that made her one of those endangered species. As if vanishing in thin air if one were to look elsewhere, she gave uneasiness to anyone looking at her.

She sat on the long bench beside the circle soundlessly like a doll.

She was about six metres away from Sorata.

Due to a strange nervousness, Sorata swallowed his saliva hard.

"Even if she is so adorable, it is rude to just stare at her greedily. I can completely agree that she is the type you like."

"[...]"

"She gives off a feeling of someone that people would want to protect."

"All right. Let me use my special powers to help you. Yeah. Height: 162 cm. Weight: 45 kilograms. Her BWH from top to bottom is 79, 55, 78. I can't be wrong about this. Are you worrying that she is a washboard? Don't be so pessimistic. Because her waist is thin, her breast numbers should be larger than what imagined after she takes her clothes off. Trust me."

Sorata had already begun to listen to what Jin was saying.

"What are you saying, Jin-senpai?"

"It's because you're too easy to understand."

Even if he was dragged back to reality from his dream, Sorata couldn't take his eyes off of the girl. The girl's face looked familiar, thus he began to look for an answer to it.

Surprisingly, the answer was found quickly.

"Ah. Yes."

"Okay. Okay. You don't need to get embarrased."

"No. It's her."

He became even more confident in himself after he spoke it out.

"Ha? It's you that I should ask. What are you talking about?"

"I had always thought she would arrive by train."

"Is your brain okay?"

"I. Am. Meaning. This. Picture!"

Sorata handed the photo he got from Chihiro to Jin.

"I can't get you, seriously."

"Forget it."

Sorata stood up from the steel fence and approached the young girl sitting on the bench.

"What colour do you want to become?"

Sorata didn't know it was the girl's voice at first.

He would have heard it if he hadn't put so much focus on her.

Sorata's eyes met with her's, who was looking up. It was just this that caused him to waver.

"Me?"

She lightly nodded.

"I've never thought about it."

"Then please do."

"I'm not sure what I'll think in the future, but today it's iridescent[21]..."

"Is that a colour?"

"Actually it is a colour like a rainbow. In some sense it's an ambiguous colour."

"That's very interesting."

"How about you?"

"Eh?"

"What colour do you want to become?"

"I've never thought about it."

"What?"

"Maybe white for now."

"It's the same as your name."

"[...]"

She looked at Sorata surprised.

"I'm sorry. I'm not anyone suspicious. I am Kanda Sorata, and Chihiro-sensei called me to welcome you. You should already know this, don't you?"

"Called by Chihiro-sensei?"

"What the... Sensei's so unreasonable."

Sorata took out the photo and compared it with the girl in front of him. It was impossible to recognize her just by looking at the photo. Sorata could recognize her because the feeling she gave off to him was the same.

The young girl in front of him was Mashiro Shiina.

"From how many years back is this photo sensei gave me? She's three times that age now."

3

—Should I just take her back to Sakurasou like this?

Mashiro Shiina walked beside him in a speed like she was about to stop at any moment. Sorata pondered over what to do while looking at Mashiro's face.

Mashiro had a petite body, a weak voice, quiet and imperturbable behaviour, a constant mien, and no expression on her face.

Standing beside her was like standing on thin ice that was about to crack.

She was like a delicate glass craft that would break once touched.

This was the impression Mashiro gave.

Suddenly she said:

"'Sorata' is not bad."

"Eh?"

"It sounds nice. I like it."

Sorata was charmed. In short, Mashiro was a gullible, young girl.

However Sorata looked at it, Mashiro didn't really match the feeling of Sakurasou.

Sakurasou was a place gathered with people who surpassed common sense and who were brimming with personality. It was a nest of extraordinary humans.

Kamiigusa Misaki was an alien, Akasaka Ryuunosuke was a shut-in, Mitaka Jin was the emperor of sleepovers,

even the teacher Sengoku Chihiro was a person who hated to do troubling things and did everything as she pleased.

Jin, who had been here with them at the station was now gone.

Thanks to him, Sorata was forced to be alone with a girl he just met.

The more he wanted to say something smart, the more difficult it became to think of something to talk about.

It was also a result of Mashiro's last statement.

Sorata's face had turned completely red.

However, it were his poor looks that made Sorata willing to give his all.

"So..."

"Yeah?"

"You're going to study in Suiko?"

Mashiro shook her head lightly.

"Transfer into the school."

"Ah, yeah... So you're in grade 2?"

This time Mashiro nodded her head lightly.

"We're in the same year."

Her limpid eyes looked up from the corner with no change in her expression at all.

Sorata turned away in embarrassment.

They continued walking to Sakurasou in silence.

It seems like I could only become her shield. My opponent is hard to handle., Sorata thought.

They could see the rooftop of Sakurasou already.

No sooner had they arrived at Sakurasou, did a moving company truck leave. The truck started its engine ear-piercingly and vanished towards the station.

Sorata helped Mashiro to put her luggage beside the gate.

"Come in now."

That being said, Sorata led her into the dormitory.

After that, Misaki rushed downstairs from the second floor, with the pace of a predator seeing its prey. No. She jumped. She buffered it with her kneecap just like a wild animal.

"~Welcome to Sakurasou~!"

She pulled the banger in her hand bluntly and hit it right at Sorata who was standing in front of Shiina.

Sorata immediately struck back by chopping her head with his hand.

"Wuahh! What are you doing to a maiden?!"

"If you're going to call yourself a maiden, please stop sleeping in my room!"

"~It's fine! I haven't even kissed. I'm a new product from head to toe――"

Mashiro looked at them blankly.

"N-No. Senpai is only my senpai. We don't have any suspicious relationship! Please don't have any creepy misunderstanding, okay?"

"~Eh. What? Kouhai-kun is interested in Mashiro-chan already~?"

"No! Wait... How did you know she's Shiina?"

"Very well. Don't just stand there. Hurry and take her to her room."

"It's you who is blocking our way, okay?!"

"~I finally have a neighbour! Will she stay over at my place, or invite me to stay over at her place? Will she discuss her love troubles with me? Wah, I'm excited~!"

Pushing the ecstatic Misaki aside, Sorata brought Mashiro up to the second floor where males were prohibited from going up to.

The doorplate of room 202 was labelled with ' Mashiro's Room' and drawn with enigmatic cartoons.

"~I made this last night~"

Misaki had come up out of nowhere already and was now approaching them boldly.

"You were playing video games last night."

Completely unaffected, Misaki opened the door without the owner's consent.

"Creak!"

Recalling from Sorata's memory, it was an empty room with nothing inside. Now there was a bed, a dressing table, a desk, a computer connected to a large monitor, and clothes in the luggage that were neatly placed.

"~How's this? My work efficiency is amazing. While you were out, I've already done everything. It's just too awesome! The moving company! So professional! You guys are certainly professional~!"

Misaki was strangely elated, puffed out her chest in pride, as if it was all her work.

"You've done nothing actually."

"~I've been watching them closely on the side~"

Mashiro who was about to enter the room looked at their conversation blankly.

"Shiina... Are you really planning to stay here?"

"Yes."

She said it like a breeze. Her voice was small, but it was articulated and clear, as if the sound itself was inconceivable. The sad thing was the emotion in her voice stayed insipid whenever she spoke.

He would become anxious just by looking at her from the side. What was wrong with that strange feeling he had?

"~Ah. I'm really happy that we're companions in the Arts Department~"

Indulged and fascinated, Misaki wanted to stick to Mashiro but was halted by Sorata who pressed on her head.

"Shiina. Are you in the Arts Department?"

The Arts Department had an unbelievably low acceptance rate. It should have been difficult to transfer into the school.

"Yes."

Mashiro replied flatly and calmly.

"~You're too naive and inexperienced. You really don't know anything. Information is the key to winning in modern wars. Someone like you is just going to lose every single time. How miserable. I really want to tidy you up with a rope~!"

Sorata suppressed Misaki by saying 'whatever', trying to guide her back to the right track.

"Then what do you know, Senpai?"

"~Mashiro-chan is super famous in the world of contemporary design art! It is alleged that she went to England when she was small to receive elite education~"

Then that implied that she was one of those who went there and returned. Her inconceivable behaviour, her

slow rhythm of speech, and the special ambiance around her might be ascribed to the fact that she lived overseas for a long time.

"~A few of her drawing have already been showcased in art galleries and won awards! Her drawings seem to have a high value~"

Based on that Mashiro didn't deny what she said, this ought to be true.

Nevertheless, I was not quite sure of how things work in the art world.

"How famous is she in terms of Shinkansen?"

"~She of course is the 'Nozomi'~!"

"That's incredible."

With her arms akimbo[22], Misaki had a proud attitude : 'How's that? Are you convinced now?'

"That's because you're a student of the Arts Department after all."

"~Why's that~?"

"That's why you'd know about Shiina."

"No. I heard it from Chihiro yesterday."

"Then why are you still keeping that attitude!"

"~I still win even if I had known it one second earlier than you. Fuhahahaha~!"

Sorata chopped on her head due to her silly smile. However, Misaki blocked it directly.

"~You can't use the same move against me twice~"

If that's the case, let me smack at your forehead horizontally with my backhand, Sorata thought.

"~Wuaghh! It hurts. Kouhai-kun, are you a kindergarden kid who likes to grope girls~?"

"I don't have any feelings for you, Senpai, except for impatience!"

"~I know you're trying to fake your age now. I also know you want to make yourself look like an adult at your age! But lying isn't the right way to do it! Just a while ago you tried to rush into the bathroom to sneak

up on me while I was naked and at the end even blood shot out of your nose! It's obvious that you're excited to see my wet body! And yet you're so shy... How cute~!"

"What?! That was just an accident because you neglected the rules of the bathing time! I was being the victim, not you! Give my red and white blood cells back to me!"

"~I'm stunning when I'm naked~!"

"You're already stunning when you're not!"

Sorata suddenly remembered that Mashiro was also here so he moved his gaze towards her with trepidation. To his surprise, there was no expression on her face. She was only staring at Sorata and Misaki blankly.

"Eh. Did we scare you off?"

"Why?"

"The conversation we had just now."

Mashiro tilted her head, having a face of ignorance.

Her charming behaviour made Sorata speechless.

"~'Dammit, She's so cute...' is what Kouhai-kun wants to say, isn't it? It's just too blatant~"

"Can't you just stay quiet even if you know that?!"

Sorata grasped his fist and swirled it vibrantly on Misaki's head.

"Ouch. Ouch. Ouch. Ouch. Ouch. Ouch!"

"You guys are still getting along pretty well."

Turning his head to the voice, Sorata saw Chihiro walking to them like a zombie. It looked like she didn't succeed in the mixer, it was probably due to Sorata's curse.

Walking behind Chihiro was Jin who got away at the station. Jin looked at Sorata and Misaki with a bad mood, holding a shopping bag with both hands. Inside the bag were hotpot foods, snacks, and juice.

After Jin's eyes met with Sorata's, he dexterously smiled by upping the corner of his lips.

"Her welcoming party should need this stuff."

"Sensei, you're back so early. So, haven't you found a husband after all?"

"You dare to look down upon me. There wasn't even a doctor! All of them were just lying! How daring of them to lie about their experiences."

"Sensei, you also lie about your age. You're no better than them."

Chihiro once said she was forever twenty-seven at the mixer.

"Alas, really! How I wish every lucky one would die."

"~Chihiro. Give it your all. Kouhai-kun said if you can't find a husband, he'll be your husband~"

"I've never said that!"

"You're right. It would be plausible after five years."

"Never!"

"But, I've never thought she would really come."

Chihiro turned her gaze to Mashiro, sounding out what Mashiro was now thinking. Chihiro looked at Mashiro profoundly, so she was assured she was right.

"Yeah."

Mashiro replied in an extremely small voice.

"Sensei, can I ask a question about that?"

"All I want now is to beat up people, so keep it short."

"Then let it be one question."

Actually Sorata had many more questions he wanted to ask.

For example, why would someone come here when he or she was already learning arts overseas? There were also some questions about her parents.

Sorata picked the question he cared about the most in a stack of questions.

"Why did Shiina move to Sakurasou? There should be vacant rooms in normal dormitories."

"Do I even have to explain?"

"No. I have no idea."

"That is because this is the most suitable place for Mashiro."

"Ah?"

"You will know after a while, especially you."

At the end, Sorata still couldn't understand the reason behind the strange glimmer flickering in Chihiro's eyes.

4

"I'm so sleepy. I really want to sleep now."

As he pondered why today wasn't part of the spring break, he got himself out of his bed reluctantly.

The reason for his insufficient sleep was Misaki's fault. Recently everything that went wrong had to be her fault. Be it global warming, stock disaster, rise of the Japanese dollar, or the retirement of the concorde jet and the Speed Express. Everything had to be Misaki's fault, it had to be.

The reason for his late sleep was because of the welcoming party for Mashiro. Chihiro still couldn't throw off the setback from the mixer and shut herself in her room like Akasaka Ryuunosuke. As a result, Sorata, Misaki, and Jin were the only ones responsible to welcome Mashiro.

Around the hotpot that Jin prepared, Misaki spoke non-stop easily without even the slightest panting. On the other hand Sorata became the shield for Mashiro to protect her from being harmed. Even though Mashiro hadn't shown a sign that she was annoyed by Misaki, she didn't have the slightest change to Jin's humorous jokes either, so it had been hard to know how she felt.

Though different from usual people in many places, she was essentially chaste and quiet, as if she would vanish, if no one did look at her closely. This was the new impression that Mashiro gave off to Sorata. If Sorata didn't protect her meticulously, she might not survive in Sakurasou. Sorata swore to himself to safeguard her with his all.

After finishing the last meal, the mixed congee, Misaki drew an acrobat, who somersaulted backward with his hands on a horizontal bar, on an English textbook she

had never used for three years as a divertissement. The quality of the texture in her picture was comparable with pictures in animes.

After that, Mashiro took out a sketchbook from her suitcase and drew the seven cats around her.

At the moment Sorata saw the picture, the picture gave him the creeps as the seven cats drawn on the sketchbook looked as if they were about to move, and they looked even more real than the real ones.

This drawing was now hung up on the wall of Sorata's room.

This part ended last night at half-past eleven. However , Sorata was forced by Misaki to play video games with her until just now.

He couldn't remember when the time had been that he fell asleep, but at least it was a miracle that he was awake on his bed now and hadn't seen Misaki around him yet. He slightly remembered Jin who simply pulled Misaki away and required her to sleep in her own room. Nevertheless, he couldn't distinguish whether it had been a dream or reality.

Scarcely had he come out of his room, a sound came from the door.

He looked into the distance.

"~Ayahh!~", Misaki cried out loud as she dashed out. Sorata wondered whether it was because she was excited of the new term. Why was Misaki brimming with liveliness? Feeling that it was unfair, Sorata remembered being toyed with last night, so he decided to look attentively up her skirt, seeing faintly aqua-blue panties, but was knocked potently on the head by Jin behind him.

Misaki was gone, but Sorata's head was still in pain.

"Don't get all horny in the morning."

Jin quickly walked to the dining room, depriving Sorata the chance to complain.

Then Chihiro walked up to him.

"Sensei, you're early today."

It was only half past seven today, and there was still sufficient time, an hour before school started.

"Kanda, keep this in mind: A man becomes strong after gaining different kinds of experiences."

Even though he couldn't understand what this truly meant, he guessed she was alluding to the gathering yesterday. And so he decided not to get to the bottom of it.

"Can you be in charge of Mashiro? You'll only need to take her to the staff room."

"Yeah. It's the first day of school after all. I'll show her the road."

Chihiro stretched forward and poked Sorata's chest.

"W-What?"

"Are you really going to take her there? Will you shoulder the responsibility to take her with you?"

"I said I understand."

"Very well. I'll hand this all to you!"

"Alas. This just feels somewhat disgusting."

He first thought Chihiro would counter him, but at his surprise, she only went away after snorting, "Hng Hng".

Having seen her leave, Sorata looked at the clock on the wall: 7:40 A.M..

He couldn't hear Mashiro's breath coming downstairs, so he thought it would be better to wake her up.

"I remember it's prohibited for men to go up to the second floor."

The floor creaked as Sorata walked up the stairs, making him a bit jittery. His mind began to think of how Mashiro would appear in her pajamas and sleeping. This created a peculiar anticipation in him.

Sorata wasn't the type of person who had trouble dealing with girls. That was thanks to Misaki who gave him immunity. Nevertheless, could anyone count Misaki as a girl? If someone may ask, Sorata would probably tell him or her she's more of an alien.

Having walked to Mashiro's door, Sorata was now at the zenith of his nervousness. His abdomen began to roll about at the centre.

"Am I... afraid?"

He wanted to ease himself up. However, his deliberate voice went up and became even more awkward.

"Hey! Shiina! If you don't wake up, you'll be late."

Sorata felt his strange call was futile.

There was no reply. Sorata wondered if she had heard him or not.

And then Sorata started knocking on the door.

"Shiina! Wake up! Oh gosh, she really isn't responding."

He knocked on the door with more strength. Knock, knock, knock.

The cruel truth was that the only response he got was silence.

He held onto the doorknob, suddenly realising what he was about to do.

"No, no, wait, wait. This isn't Misaki senpai's room. How could the door be unlocked?"

To confirm it he lightly turned the doorknob, there was no resistance felt.

By this feeling he was sure the door was unlocked.

"I've already said, this isn't Misaki senpai's room. Opening it without notice would be bad..."

That being said, nothing would happen if he just called her from the outside.

"There's no other way to do it then."

He meaninglessly found excuses for himself while holding on to the doorknob.

He slowly turned the doorknob, peeking in through the small crevice.

"Eh?"

Speechless, he opened the door wide unconsciously.

"What happened?"

Thinking that he went into the wrong room, he checked the door number in a flustered manner. Room 202. It was surely Mashiro's room. Right. He was right. Bingo.

Yet, what was now in front of him was utterly different from what he had seen yesterday.

There were clothes, underwear, books, and manga scattered on the floor. The carpet was gone. The room looked as if having been swept by a hurricane.

An alarm rang in his mind: *What happened?*

What followed was the word 'thief'.

Blood rushed to his brain and his body began to sweat.

"Hey, Shiina!"

He rushed into the room in panic.

Mashiro wasn't on the bed or the floor. She was nowhere to be seen.

Every time he looked around, he would panic even more.

The room was a mess and Mashiro wasn't inside.

It was a desperate situation.

With both of his feet trembling, Sorata held onto the table to stabilise himself. The monitor brightened up as Sorata seemed to have touched the mouse. The sudden light made Sorata shriek lightly.

He looked at the monitor with resentment.

In the brackets that were cut out was a drawing of handsome guy who was flattering a girl. He held the face of the blushed girl and approached her gradually. The artwork was fantastic and well drawn. The ratio of the heads and the bodies were fairly balanced so the whole picture wouldn't look too real. Nevertheless, some of the lines were too much and too long.

No matter how he looked at it, it looked like the draft of a shoujo manga to him.

"Why would Mashiro..."

He couldn't make up what was happening on. His mind stopped functioning. Something moved at his feet.

Frightened, he bounced back and pried into the place below the table with extra care.

Cramped in the small space below the table, Shiina Mashiro was delightfully sleeping with blankets and clothes wrapped around her. The space was like the hut of a hamster.

Sorata heaved a sigh of relief. *Good*, he thought. *Anyways, it's good. No, it's very good.*

He looked around the room anew.

He pondered in his mind of what really happened. Suddenly something blackened upon his eyes. If it wasn't a thief, then only one answer would be left.

Stop. Let me think for a moment.

Sorata wasn't trying to declare this to anyone. He closed his eyes and endeavoured to find a plausible reason.

—The reason for this is that she isn't used to living in Japan .

But how would any citizen in any country play hurricane games in their own room?

—Maybe the way she sleeps is just a bit poor.

In which way is her sleeping appearance poor? She's already sleeping under the table.

—She must have been conquered by aliens.

This doesn't feel real.

—Now that you mention this, maybe it's all a dream. Sorata , you're still in your dream.

Ah. I see it now. You're right. This possibility is the most plausible, Sorata thought.

Having explained this to himself and getting his own consent, Sorata got out of Mashiro's room.

He closed the door with the back of his hand and inhaled deeply.

It was about time for him to wake up from his dream.

Having made up his mind, he opened the door.

Not before long, Sorata was lifting his head way up. Certainly, the room was just like what he had seen a moment ago.

It was a picture that was impossible for one to believe that someone would actually be living in here.

Though Mashiro was a bit different from normal people in some places, Sorata had always believed that she would belong to the group of people he was in. He even thought she would finally become the oasis of his soul...

"...Oh my God. What have I done wrong?"

Though desperate at the beginning, Sorata still decided to walk through the small gaps between the clothes and the underwear to the table. To a healthy highschool boy, seeing a girl's clothes scattered

everywhere on the floor was nasty, especially when they were vivid underwear —That was the worst part.

He tried not to look, but his gaze would still float there .

Kneeling under the table, Sorata called her cautiously.

"Umm... Shiina-san? Would you mind getting up?"

She gave no response.

"Oi, Oi."

"[...]"

The only sound he heard was a regular sleeping breathing sound.

"I would be very glad if you can get up—"

"[...]"

Feeling helpless, Sorata tried to pull the edges of the blankets, but because Shiina was holding on them too tightly, he felt resistance. So he could only give up on this and resorted to shaking her shoulders.

"Hey. It's morning. Time to get up."

"...Morning cannot come again."

"No, no. It is already morning! Don't say such scary things."

Shiina lifted her head, buried inside her clothes and her underwear, and stared at Sorata blankly for a while. After almost a minute, she finally met her eyes with those of Sorata's.

"'Morning."

"[...]"

Shiina's bed hair went into the hut again.

"If you fall asleep you'll die! It's bad to be late on the first day of school!"

"...I understand. I'll get up."

"Hey. You're unexpectedly sensible."

Absent-mindlessly, Shiina crawled out of the table and stood up.

The blankets and clothes on her fell down slowly.

Her shoulders were exposed first. Then it were her delicate arms, a not so ample breast, a thin waist, and the curved line of her buttocks. Everything was completely revealed before Sorata's eyes.

For an instant, Sorata's blood boiled.

"Waaaargh!"

Sorata's mournful cry reverberated so much in the room, that one would suspect someone had found blood in their urine.

"How noisy."

Mashiro rubbed her eyes, puzzled.

"Wait! You, you, you! Wuaaaagh!"

"What?"

"Put on your clothes! Why are you naked?! What race do you belong to?!"

Though wavered to the most extreme, Sorata still used all of his rationality that was left to speak to her.

"For what?"

"Wake up!"

"...In the washroom..."

"Then?"

"Take out the clothes..."

"Very well. You only need to put them on."

"Take them all out."

"Okay! Stop! You don't have to take them all out!"

"Then I thought it would be fine to stay like this."

"What kind of logical interpretation was that?! You should at least bear some responsibility. Also, put on your clothes! Anything, just wear them on!"

It was hard to pacify himself when he knew that Mashiro was naked behind him.

"Time's running out. Just put on your uniform!"

Sorata dug up a Suiko unifrom from the messy pile of clothes and threw it to Shiina.

The sound of clothes rubbing against each other was heard from his back.

His heart felt almost like exploding.

"Okay?"

Sorata said it after the time he had guessed it would take.

"Okay."

"Let me say, you should at least..."

Sorata turned his head while speaking, but then his mouth froze.

Mashiro had only covered her body with the uniform. The buttons were all unbuckled, and thus *a lot of things* were visible.

"On which level do you think this is okay?!"

He turned around once again and couldn't help but kneel down and hold his head.

"What?"

"You should know!"

"You have a problem?"

"It's you who has a problem!"

"Yeah."

"What do you mean 'yeah'? Wear your clothes already!
"

Then another sound of the rubbing of clothes was heard. Sorata decided to wait a bit longer this time because of the earlier incident.

"H-Have you put on your clothes?"

"Underwear?"

"Put it on!"

"Which one should I wear?"

"Don't let me choose for you!"

"Then it's unnecessary."

"Why would it be unnecessary?! It would be a disaster if a wind blew! Put it on! Put it on! Please, put it on!"

Sorata picked up a light green underwear from the floor and threw it to Shiina, shrieking as he did it.

"This underwear isn't cute."

"Do you have someone to show it to today?!"

"I suppose not."

"Then just be tolerant and wear it!"

Crying out loud in the morning almost made his brain vessels explode.

Having a glance at his phone, the time was already fifteen past eight.

"Crap. Hey. Shiina. Hurry up!"

"It's all right."

Satisfied for wearing her underwear, Mashiro still had a messy bed hair. Her hair could almost accommodate small birds, making a huge difference from her proper face. It was surely a tragic sight.

"Your head! Or your hair, I mean! Fix it in the washroom! And wash your face while you're at it!"

"Where?"

"Didn't I tell you yesterday?! Come with me!"

Confused, Sorata walked to the first floor, but Shiina didn't come with him. She was coming at a distance with slow steps.

"Ah. Wait. Take off your jacket before you wash your face!"

Sorata held Shiina's jacket and pushed her into the washroom. He used this vacant time to return to his room and changed his own clothes.

Sorata did it in less than a minute, and his empty bag was soon laying on his shoulders.

He swiftly returned to the washroom; at the same time , Shiina was also coming out.

Then, Sorata gave out a mournful cry once again.

Probably because of washing her face, the chest part of her uniform got all wet, transparent and sticking onto her skin.

And because she didn't put on a bra, the not so ample breasts and their tips were completely exposed.

"Wait! You! Listen to what I say! You should at least wear the minimum underwear or something!"

"Because you didn't help me pick it out."

"Is it my fault now? Isn't that too weird?"

Mashiro titled her head slightly and stared at him blankly.

Sorata's common sense had no effect on her.

In a bid to maintain his calmness, Sorata went to the washroom to grab a towel. The washroom had also become a dreadful sight. The tap was spraying water like a fountain, and the washroom was already flooded.

"Don't you have the habit of taking a bath in the morning?!"

"I don't bathe."

"Don't answer with something silly so seriously!"

"You're tiresome."

"Is it I? Am I the problem here?"

Sorata closed the tap, took out all the towels he could find, and laid them on the floor of the washroom.

At this moment, what Chihiro said last night sprang to his mind.

—That is because this is the most suitable place for Mashiro.

He understood what she meant now.

—You will know after a while, especially you.

"Dammit! That teacher, who hates to be bothered! How dare she pushes everything onto me!"

He knew finding it out now was too late, yet he still wanted to complain.

"We will be late for school."

"Oh, look who's talking!"

Sorata's yelling that came from deep in his soul, pierced through the spring sky.

5

That night Sorata exploited dinnertime to have a Sakursou meeting on measures to solve the big problem, Shiina Mashiro.

Sakurasou meetings were also the occassions for everyone to decide the rules of how they lived together.

Everything, ranging from meals, buying things, cleaning the washroom, to handling leaks and beehives. Such peculiar missions were decided in this meeting from day one.

The purpose of the meeting today was to settle ' Mashiro Duty' and find the appropriate person to put in charge.

After about a month of not seeing each other, they now gathered around the round table once again. In clockwise direction there were Chihiro, Misaki, Jin, Sorata, and Mashiro.

Akasaka Ryuunosuke, who refused to leave his room, participated through a chat room. With a fried prawn in his mouth, Misaki typed on the keyboard with tapping sounds.

"Yes. It isn't anything special for me to find everyone to come here today. It's just to let everyone solve a serious problem in Sakurasou together."

Compared to Sorata, who was talking with a strong voice, everyone was focusing on his or her dinner, not paying heed to what he was saying.

To revitalise the participants from their dead state, Sorata banged his hands on the round table, *BAM*!

As a result, he had been late that morning.

After washing her face, letting her change into a shirt that was the same colour as her underwear to replace her soaked uniform, letting her put on her socks and shoes, and tidying up her messy hair, they were completely over time.

Then they decided to have an elegant breakfast as they were going to be late after all.

They missed the boring morning ceremony, but at least they came in time to show up at the teacher's lesson.

When Sorata was bringing Mashiro to the staff room, Sorata was stunned by the fact that Chihiro didn't scold him for being late, maybe because they were earlier than she thought they would have been.

If Chihiro had been certain, wouldn't it be a lot better if she had set things straight about Shiina at the beginning?

Due to the stress in the morning, Sorata was completely deaf to the lessons in the first school term in his second grade.

After school, Chihiro adamantly threw the job of school touring for Shiina to Sorata.

Wherever Sorata took Mashiro to, Mashiro looked utterly uninterested. As a result, Sorata felt tired and incompetent during the tour.

Taking Mashiro back to the starting spot was also Sorata's job, as Mashiro couldn't even remember a route that spans a mere ten minutes.

After the tour, Sorata returned to the dormitory. However, Mashiro didn't return after one or two hours.

Worried, Sorata went out to look for her. He found out that she had become a lost sheep in the school and failed to find her way back to the dormitory.

Furthermore, she was completely unaware and said she was now returning to the dormitory.

Things got even worse later.

At the road back to Sakurasou, Sorata, who was on shopping duty this week, paid a visit to the convenience store to buy milk for Misaki, as requested.

Mashiro wrecked some havoc there.

She started taking big mouthfuls of a Baumkuchen[23] placed in the store before paying for it. As she took the Baumkuchen from the cupboard so directly and ate it with such gusto, Sorata for a while couldn't make head or tails of what was happening.

"Umm... Shiina-san? What are you doing?"

"Eating Baumkuchen."

"Why?"

"Because I love Baumuchen."

"If everything is permitted as long as one loves it, then there wouldn't be any need for the police!"

"Surely there is still a lot there."

"Because it's a product! It's here to be bought!"

Mashiro tilted her head, looking like what he said was totally incomprehensible to her.

"Shiina, what life have you been having all this time?"

"Drawing."

"And?"

"And also drawing."

"[...]"

"And also drawing."

"I've heard that! I was waiting for you to say something else!"

When the store manager came in for the noise, Sorata felt utterly embarrassed, lowering his head incessantly to apologise.

"Shiina! What do you want me to do?! Have I done anything wrong to you before?!"

"Do you want to have a bite?"

With an adorable face, she tore a piece, wanting Sorata to widen his mouth and eat it with an 'ah~' sound.

"No!"

"It's delicious."

As a result, Sorata could only take the empty bag and another half-emptied bag to the cashier to pay for the food. The store manager only laughed at the presumably strange girl, for he knew Sorata. This was the fundamental salvation that Sorata could have hoped for.

"These are the appalling episodes I had in one go today."

"Yeah. This can't be helped."

Chihiro, who held a feast by just her beer, said.

"This child only learned how to draw in all of her days, so she's a bit different from others."

"No, no. This isn't a bit!"

Even though Mashiro was said to be in a miserable state, she didn't pay any heed to what they were talking about. She dexterously peeled off the skin of the fried pawns with her chopsticks, and then put the fried skin onto Sorata's dish with surprising elegance.

"What are you doing?"

"Its skin has peeled off."

"Is now the time for jokes?!"

"It isn't funny."

"You don't necessarily need to deny it!"

She titled her head slightly and then reverted her interest back to the decomposition of the prawns, converting another fried prawn into an ordinary prawn. The skin peeled off was transferred to Sorata's dish. Finally, she threw the whole naked prawn into her mouth.

"She's also very picky about food."

"Teacher. Could you next time set everything straight beforehand?!"

For he was shocked again at a new rising problem, Misaki took the chance to steal two fried prawns from Sorata's dish. When Sorata was about to protest, the fried prawns had already gone into Misaki's mouth.

"Senpai, you too... What are you doing?!"

"~Kouhai-kun, only you can get things from Mashiro-chan. You're too vile~!"

"Then please take away this shell that was left after its skin was peeled!"

"~That's because I'm in puberty now~!"

Misaki said confidently with her head held high and her chest puffed out.

"Me too!"

"~I personally think that notebooks and 'not wearing underwear' are quite simliar[24]~"

"What are you playing now?!"

"Okay, okay. Stop acting spoiled and headstrong. Kanda, please help me to take another beer."

Drunk as hell, Chihiro rolled her empty beer bottle to Sorata.

"Take it yourself!"

"You're closer."

Speechless, Jin smiled wryly, stood up, took out the beer from the refrigerator, and handed it to Chihiro.

"Mitaka is such a good man. What a complete difference from Kanda."

"Sensei, all you want is beer, no matter who gives it to you! Besides, we should be talking about Shiina now!"

"I've only heard from her parents that she needs someone to take care of her, so I decided to let her come to Sakurasou."

To take care of her. How terrible this sounded.

"Then please shoulder the responsibility to take care of her, sensei!"

"Oi. Oi. Don't say such impossible things, Sorata."

The one interrupting was Jin who had already finished his dinner and was now busy typing messages on his phone.

"This meeting is pointless."

"I would be very troubled!"

"Why would you even think about it? I come back occasionally. Letting Misaki take care of someone else is also impossible, I can be sure because I'm her childhood

friend. Along with that, Chihiro is busy with the mixer. Dragging her into this business would be too bad for her. "

Jin didn't mention one name, and he thought he didn't even need to.

"So I'm putting my last hope on you, Jin-senpai!"

"What? That's even more impossible. On Monday, it's Ami from the acting club. On Tuesday, it's Kiko the nurse. On Wednesday it's Kana the flower shop attendant, and on Thursday it's Maiko the newlywed, isn't it? On Friday it's Shuzune the showgirl. And Tomi the office lady won't let me go back home at the weekends. My schedule is fully packed. There is no way I can have time for that."

"You damn playboy! Have you upgraded to a Maharaja[25]?! Do you wish to immigrate to India in the future? You bastard!"

"Don't be so agitated yet. I've done nothing wrong."

"Have some self-awareness! At least getting along with married women is ethically wrong."

"Ah. You're right. A while ago I was almost discovered by her husband. That was really dangerous."

Having finished typing his message, Jin put down his phone at last.

At the same time, Chihiro was drinking affluently her sixth cup of beer today.

"Personally, I couldn't stand to see my adorable cousin falling into the dangerous hands of Mitaka, so he shouldn't be taken account. In other words, Kanda, however much you lament it, you're just wasting your energy."

Jin scoffed at himself of this. No, blatantly this interested him.

"Umm... May I boldly ask if there are other people in question, sensei?"

"I've prepared four of them, but all four are you."

Sorata didn't shirk to this unimaginably fooling answer. If he did, he would be easily obliged.

"I'm planning to leave Sakurasou soonish, so there's no way I could do it. Ever."

"Have you found feeders for the cats?"

Jin turned to him with a light smile.

How obvious.

"~Umm~"

With a glittering mouth because of the fried shrimps, Misaki spoke while looking at the screen of the laptop.

"What?"

"~Ryuunosuke said: 'I don't have time to waste at such a pointless and down to earth meeting. I'm going offline... .' Ah, he went offline. Come back! But he just might not come back... That's it. I'm full. My tummy is so bloated~"

"All right. Then the 'Mashiro Duty' will hereby be assigned to Sorata. Dismissed!"

Jin picked up his phone and stood up. He didn't return to his room and headed to the gate instead. Today was

Tuesday, so it should be the day for him to meet Kiko the nurse.

Misaki saw him off impotently until she couldn't see him.

"~Thanks for the hard work, everyone. So, I have to continue to work on my retakes now. Good luck. I need to do it now. I have to complete it~"

That being said, Misaki picked up the laptop and headed to the second floor making little jumps.

Chihiro, on the other hand, was taking another bottle of beer from the refrigerator.

Only Sorata and Shiina were left at the round table.

A heavy atmosphere filled the room.

It was the first time he had been in such a relationship: One to take care of the other and the one being taken care of.

The turbulent vortex in his mind whooshed and whished.

"Sorata."

"W-What?"

"Please get along with me."

Shiina bowed to greet him.

"Oh. Okay. It's me who would need to... Wait! Why are you sounding like you have to be taken care of already?"

"What you say sometimes confuses me."

"If it's I who is wrong, then the world can be demolished now..."

"I would be troubled."

"Ah, Crap! My mind is getting abnormal! I have to move out. I have to leave Sakurasou!"

April 6.

The following was written on Sakurasou's meeting report:

Mashiro Duty has been assigned to Kanda. Good luck, Kouhai-kun! I'll support you! Recorded by: Kamiigusa Misaki

Chapter 2: What should I do?

1

Kanda Sorata's morning started very early.

It wasn't even 6:30 A.M. yet.

Before the phone he used in place of an alarm clock even sounded, whether it was the white cat Hikari's rear waking him up, or a direct punch from the black cat Nozomi, or an attack to the stomach from the striped cat Kodama, Sorata would be woken up forcefully from the world of dreams and brought back into reality.

What followed after was a quick-paced tune, a tune from a war-themed RPG that he used to like back when he was in middle school.

For the sake of fully waking himself up early in the morning, he had set this tune as the alarm sound in April this year. After listening to just a part of it, he'd always get the feeling that he could do anything.

After washing his face, he headed towards the dinning hall, accompanied by his seven cats who were awaiting their breakfast.

After Sorata prepared the cat food, the cats ravished it like their lives depended on it. During this time, Sorata would also munch on toast and gulp down milk.

All of this was something that couldn't be more normal.

The only thing that was different was that every time he opened the fridge, he would feel a tinge of gloominess .

On the front side of the fridge was the duty-rooster. Many colorful magnets adorned it, and on it was a line of words that he could not ignore.

—Mashiro Duty, Kanda Sorata.

The red was a red of eternity.

A proof of permanence.

Even though he was indeed emotionally damaged, Sorata still carried the laptop which he borrowed from Misaki, and walked into the kitchen. He opened a website that contained methods for creating easy bentos[26] and started preparing the ingredients.

Today's ingredients would be fried tuna, spinach, raw vegetables mixed with ham, and last but not least, fried carrots with soy sauce. It was similar to last night's dinner. Mashiro had also agreed to eat these. Mashiro did not seem to dislike fried food for whatever reason.

While speedily preparing the bento, Sorata munched on another piece of toast.

Every now and then, he would take a quick glace at the laptop screen, just to confirm the instructions for preparing the bento, and, while waiting, would also take a look at some game developers' blogs to pass the time.

Of course, he did not forget to chat with Ryunosuke, who was running around in different chat rooms.

— Sorata, what do you think of the 'foreshadowing of death' ?

— Are you talking about something like 'after this war ends , propose to him'[27]*?*

— You're right. Even though there are many precedents, in the world of fantasies, they use willpower that defies common sense. Characters that accidentally say the wrong things would

always face the fate of death. Sometimes they die brutally, but there are others that die an elegant death. I wondered, are they aware of the foreshadowing of death?

— No, most likely not.

Even though Ryunosuke was a strange person, he was not someone who made others unhappy. That was the impression Sorata got after chatting with him.

— The more we portray a non-fictional story that is closer to current society, the more we should be able to understand society's existence and willpower. But still, there is the foreshadowing of death. Is it just the author or the script writer wanting to portray the pitifulness of human nature?

— You have just completely described the troublesome side of this conversation, eh.

— This way, it would create a 'does the new world live in a foreshadowing of death' topic.

— Then, will this topic take long? My tuna is almost burnt.

— Well then, that leaves me no choice. We'll talk another time, buddy.

— Ah, yeah, you're right. We're in the same class this year, huh?

— Classes are only something that are randomly decided; that statement does not contain any meaning.

Ryunosuke has left the chat.

At the exact same time the food for the bento was done . Sorata quickly placed the food into two bento boxes, one for himself and the other for Mashiro.

"Hm. It looks delicious."

Sorata picked up a few morsels to taste; every one of the dishes tasted great.

"If I really want to, I totally can do it. Ah, crap, I'm getting a little happy."

Sorata boasted about himself. But suddenly he was dragged back to reality and it gave him a feeling of emptiness.

"Wait, what am I doing...? I'm not a Yamato Nadeshiko [28] making a bento for her boyfriend!"

Until last year, Sorata had always purchased his lunch at the dining hall or from street vendors, so he could give himself another 30 minutes of sleep. The only reason why he was waking up so early was because of Mashiro.

It had happened two weeks ago:

In the blink of an eye, it had already been the second day of the new term and it was the lesson in the afternoon.

During lunch break, Sorata went to check on Mashiro, but found her sitting alone in the classroom.

Sorata had no choice but to invite her to the dining hall in order to eat, but they only ended up drawing even more attention from the crowd. Mashiro was very picky, and thus threw all the food that she didn't take a liking to onto Sorata's plate. All thanks to her, more weird rumors spread. It was really hard to eat peacefully.

And there were people that added oil to the fire.

"Eh, aren't those two from Sakurasou?"

"Idiot! Don't look directly into their eyes!"

"It really is my first time seeing them. Awesome, man, they actually move. And they're eating."

"Ah! Crap! If we don't get farther away from them, we'll also get infected with the Sakurasou Virus!"

Just like that, they were treated like weird monsters. And that made Sorata uncomfortable.

Even though Sorata thought of 'let's bring Shiina to the street vendors then', just the thought of her eating the food at the grocery store made him give up before even trying.

So for the rest of the lunches, it became a miserable development where Sorata confirmed what Mashiro wanted to eat, and finally cooked it in the morning.

Sorata did not really enjoy cooking, so it was obvious that he was not good with it. In Sakurasou, Jin was a perfectionist, and Misaki, who was good at almost

everything, was also rather skilled. Even Chihiro knew more dishes than Sorata. If one were to rank Sorata in terms of cooking skills in Sakurasou, it would be faster to start counting from the bottom.

Initially, Sorata did look for Misaki, who prepared bentos for both Jin and himself.

"~Then, together with Kouhai-kun's bento, let's make a Russian roulette bento! Only one person will have rice with mustard, bringing them to hell! A shivering and fearsome lunch break will begin its prologue right now!~ "

She joyfully said this horrible idea that didn't even sound like a joke. Sorata decided then to treat this as though it never happened.

Obviously, life was never easy from the start.

"If you are making dishes, then just do it. It disgusts me that you are at one moment excited, and miserable in the next."

Chihiro, who unknowingly appeared in the dinning hall, took away all the leftover vegetables.

"How can you say that a student is disgusting?! If we really started to trace it back, then isn't it all your fault?! Sensei actually gave up on being a guardian and pushed all the responsibilities onto me!"

"I think there is a proverb that says: 'When you are young, you should go through hardship.'"

Chihiro took a piece of fried tuna and put it into her mouth.

"Ah! Wait!"

"Wow, it tastes really good. Kanda, I'll leave mine to you too."

"How can you still be so thick-skinned?!"

At this point, another person came in.

"Huh? What's happening~~ What's happening~~ You should count me in, too~"

Misaki sang a mysterious song, and rushed down from the second floor.

"Tuna! There's the smell of tuna!"

The Misaki that was filled with energy early in the morning, ran to the dinning table like a cat. She straightened her back and with an amazing speed she inserted all the three dishes into her mouth.

"Why is everyone so reckless in the morning?! Hey!"

"~Yummy. Mine and Jin's bentos today are decided to be this!~"

"I didn't ask if you wanted it!"

"Don't say something so selfish."

Chihiro passed the bento box on the stand and Sorata reflectively accepted it.

Misaki on the other hand was inserting dishes into her bento with practiced movements.

Because Sorata had prepared for scenarios where he failed, so he prepared extras just in case, and it was enough for five people to eat. It made him a little unhappy. He had made too much.

"What are you doing so early in the morning?"

Jin, who rarely welcomed mornings at Sakurasou, woke up as well.

He looked into the dinning hall and silently judged the situation. After which he frankly said:

"Well, it isn't bad every once in a while."

"Kouhai-kun can marry anytime now, eh?"

"Yeah."

Sorata unhappily answered while packing Chihiro's bento.

He checked the time, it wasn't even seven.

It was already late April. After entering the fourth week, perhaps because he became more familiar with making dishes, he was able to prepare a bento faster than he had imagined. Yesterday, when he finished preparing the bentos, it was already past seven-thirty, the time to wake Mashiro up.

Today, however, there was even more time to prepare.

Sorata thought of something suddenly and extended his arms towards the computer.

Searching with 'Shiina Mashiro' as the keywords.

"What, what? Are you watching any ecchi or hentai anime?"

Misaki placed her face closer to the screen.

"I can't get that much energy early in the morning."

The engine immediately displayed the search results.

There were one hundred thousand pages.

Almost all were in English.

"~Oh, Mashiron. That's right, I don't think I've seen it before.~"

Sorata clicked on the first search result.

It was a foreign art museum's official website.

Jin curiously leaned closer to the screen as well, leaving Chihiro who was drinking her coffee as the only one left in the dinning hall.

"It's English, so I can't really read it, huh? Is this it?"

After the engine on the site displayed the results related to Mashiro's name, the screen became bright all of a sudden.

It was a webpage that had a simple design.

The green background showcased a single painting.

It showcased a sole painting on the Art Museum's wall .

The moment Sorata saw it, he got goosebumps all over . It was as though all his nerves wanted to fly out of his body.

Misaki made praises which weren't words or sentences and Jin swallowed his saliva.

Sorata's consciousness was drawn into the small screen .

"Why is this happening?"

His dried up throat sub-consciously threw out those words.

Sorata could not understand if this painting was good.

Yet, he was still strongly absorbed by the painting, which was both abstract and symbolic.

There was no way to describe it with words.

You can see light, hear sounds and even see the wind. The painting was something like that.

If you scrolled down, you could see comments judging the painting. Thankfully, there was also a Japanese translation.

— Shiina's perception and skill, which allowed her to express things such as light, sound, and air which cannot be seen by the eye, is truly worthy of admiration. It was a unique worldview, inexpressible by logic. Shiina Mashiro had just used the painting as an entryway to the city of prodigies. Our level of knowledge is probably no longer of use to her.

Misaki was praising Shiina's painting profusely.

It was the first time Sorata had seen someone praised to this extent.

He then felt that he could not calm down, and shut the computer a little boorishly.

"Kanda, I think it's time?"

Because of Chihiro's voice, he suddenly came back.

"Ah! Crap!"

After preparing the hot towel, he pushed Misaki, who was humming another weird song, aside, and walked to the second floor.

"Hey, Shiina! It's already daytime! Even if I say that, it will be still useless, so please hurry and wake up!"

After two seconds, there was still no reaction .

Sorata opened the door and stepped into the room.

Today there was again no sign of Mashiro on the bed. She was sleeping underneath the pile of clothes and panties under her desk. Her misshapened hair was poking out slightly.

Sorata woke her up while using the hot towel to press down her gravity-defying hair.

Mashiro still wasn't awake.

From his experience he knew that it was most likely going to take another five minutes.

The room was in a terribly messy state, even though it was cleaned up just yesterday before she went to bed.

The computer was turned on as well.

The spot Sorata stood on was the only orderly area in the room.

At this time, Sorata's eyes stopped at a piece of B4-sized paper.

It was a printed piece of paper containing an original sketch of a manga.

Looking closely, there were sketches all over the room.

Until today, Sorata had thought it would be the best not to stick his head in, but today his curiosity won out over his self-control.

Maybe it was because he had just seen Mashiro's painting on the art museum's website.

He took up the first piece and puzzled the rest together casually.

He arranged the pages in accordance.

There were thirty-two pages in total, with one page as the ending.

He looked at every page in order.

The art was great, seriously great. No matter what angles the characters were drawn at, it still looked suitable. Mashiro had made very beautiful sketches, displaying an overwhelming type of art.

The scenarios were interesting as well. Because of the casually drawn characters and the background, it produced a style that was rarely seen.

Sorata read every page carefully. He came to the last page and finally the last column ended.

Sorata ordered the sketches and lightly put them down on a side table.

"... It's boring."

It was so boring that it surprised Sorata.

The story was so devoid of content that it could make people think that it was a joke.

It was a shoujo manga.

An uninteresting girl falls in love with an uninteresting boy. And with no plot whatsoever, the result was a 'let's go out with each other' story.

"No, maybe it might be this type of scenario, but so what?!"

It was the type of empty manga that would make a person want to scream.

"Morning."

Mashiro slowly crawled out from under her desk.

On her upper body she wore a box-patterned, short-sleeved gown, and her lower body was bare, as if it was trying to tell others that it had left the pants in its dreams. Mashiro's slender and snow-white legs made Sorata start to lose his composure.

"Shiina! Wear something down below, too! Are you trying to tempt me?!"

The ends of her gown barely reached her upper thighs. Every time Mashiro, who had slept until she was dizzy, swayed, the ends of her gown would follow her movements as well. There were flashes of somewhat intimate bareness but at the same time her most sensual regions evaded the eyes. That heart-racing feeling transfixed Sorata; he became unable to avert his gaze.

With unsteady footsteps, Mashiro walked towards the dressing table, eyes half-closed, and sat down.

She wasn't bothered in the least by Sorata's movements.

Sorata thought to himself: *If I can bear with this and pass through my worries like this, I can become a celestial being.*

While combing Mashiro's hair, he kept thinking to himself: *So what if I become a celestial being?* With a spraying-type hair dryer, Sorata used brute force to force her hair to submit to him.

"Misaki said."

"Don't say something so suddenly! It'll scare me!"

"She said that without pants, Sorata would be happier.
"

"...Like I said, you can't be tricked by her! Senpai's brain is messed up."

"Misaki is a formidable person."

Mashiro was back into trance.

"If I were a wolf, I would have eaten you."

Right after Sorata said that, their eyes met via the mirror.

"You've survived peacefully until now", Sorata said.

"Because there is no wolf."

"No, a wolf is a metaphor. It refers to men, boys, and males in general."

"Then there is still no wolf."

"Were you in a girls' school before this? Is it your first time in a co-ed school?"

"Sorata is my first time."

"Huh?"

"My first male."

"Then shouldn't you change your way of expression?! When you say it like that, it sounds as though I did something! In actual fact, I haven't done anything, and instead I feel at a loss now!"

"I feel lucky that it was Sorata."

"You, you, what are you talking about?!"

"Because you did a lot of things to me."

"G-Get out of your trance! Quick, change your clothes!"

"I am awake."

Sorata handed over a set of uniform and fresh underwear to Mashiro.

He could not look her directly in the eyes.

Right before he was about to leave the room, Mashiro started taking off her gown.

"Wait till I get out before you change! I'll really violate you!"

Sorata shut the door.

He ignored whatever Mashiro was saying.

He rested his body on the wall.

He was worn out this early in the morning.

"What will happen in the future..."

No one answered.

No one knew.

Maybe even God didn't know.

Shiina was really talented.

It was exactly the same as in the comments.

—Our level of knowledge is no longer of use to her.

It really was a comment by a person with great judgement.

He correctly and completely saw through Mashiro.

"This really isn't a joke."

He sighed. Then Mashiro came out of her room. He still hadn't gotten used to her wearing the school uniform .

"Um..."

Mashiro called Sorata, who would usually walk away without a word, with her whisper-like voice.

"Hm?"

"Was it very boring?"

"Huh?"

"My manga."

Not knowing the right way to answer, all Sorata did was laugh bitterly. The manga was indeed drawn by Mashiro.

"You were awake then..."

"It was indeed boring, right?"

Her voice carried no emotion and no facial expression.

"~Kouhai-kun! Is Mashiro awake~?"

That's why he felt really lucky that Misaki had rushed down from the second floor and interrupted them. Misaki had also changed into her school uniform.

"We're gonna be late for school."

"Yeah."

Feeling the weak breathing behind his back, Sorata walked to the first floor. Everyone was waiting there.

After Mashiro finished her toast, the residents of Sakurasou, who usually headed to school separately, went off together.

"Akasaka, The house is yours then."

"How can you ask him to take care of the house?! He's your student!"

2

After an endless amount of time, the Modern Language lesson in the third period was finally over.

Right before the teacher, Shiroyama Koharu, left the class, she knocked Sorata on the head with a loose-leaf binder; he woke up.

"Don't sleep so openly when you're sitting in the first row."

She, the Modern Japanese teacher who graduated in the same year as Chihiro, had the looks and speech patterns of an idiotic older sister. Therefore she received criticism from some of the girls, while she was supported by some of the boys.

She was always seen with Chihiro at school and the two of them were famous. The unreliable Koharu, who would always follow Chihiro by the nose, made students comment that Chihiro was "a reliable person". But Sorata disagreed.

"Sensei's lullaby was too comfortable, I couldn't resist it and..."

"You are the only person in the whole grade that did not hand in the career survey and you dare to say something so intentionally mean. I'm going to report you to Chihiro."

Koharu puffed her cheeks unhappily and walked out of the classroom.

Sorata had no energy to even watch her leave and just collapsed on his table.

"I'm so tired..."

"Kanda-kun, you're really a downer. Can you not say something so negative in my sight? It'll make me feel dispirited as well."

The statement was made by Sorata's classmate Aoyama Nanami, who was in the same class as he was last year. Like her tone of speech, she had looks that made her stand out from the crowd. She had the attitude and posture of an excellent student, and if she were a cat, she would be an Abyssinian[29]. Her height was an average 158 cm. And her weight: Unknown. According to Jin's report, her three sizes were 81, 58, 83.

Her seat number was one. And after that was Akasaka, Asano, Ikuta, Ogikuba, Kawasaki, and finally number seven, Kanda Sorata. The seating arrangement of the class was a 6x6 square, and he ended up seated in the first row, right beside Nanami. His placement was similar to a year ago.

Nanami looked at Sorata with eyes that showed him that she still had a lot more to complain about.

"*sigh*"

"Sighing is prohibited!"

"The classroom is a place where I have the rare chance to settle down, so please try to empathize."

"It was the thirty-sixth time just now."

"Huh?"

"Sighing."

"Aoyama are you a hardcore stalker?"

"I'll hack you."

"The people here would never say something like hacking others."

"I-I know."

Including Aoyama, who came from Osaka, Suimei High's dormitories housed students from all over the country. Almost half of the class was made up of students from another city that entered by virtue of their exam results.

If Nanami spoke naturally, her accent would be quite obvious and it was like that a year ago, too. But because she wanted to perfect her intonation, she had to be wary of speaking in an accent and conceal it. Because her goal was to become a Seiyuu[30] and intonations were the basics of the basics. Over this year, her precise pattern of

speech had not changed much, but she was still unaccustomed to pronouncing sentences word-by-word without her accent. On weekends, she would receive lessons from a training class near the tax center and it seemed that she was undergoing training in many other areas.

"Then I'll smash you", Sorata proposed.

"You don't need to say that particular line again!"

"Regardless of the way they say it, girls don't really know how to use it."

"You're noisy. Didn't you forget to hand in the career survey?"

"Writing it matter-of-factly, like it was your name, that you are Aoyama Nanami from the drama section really gained my respect."

"You dare to look down upon me."

He was being glared at. The respect that he said was obviously the truth.

"Then again, how long does Kanda-kun plan to stay at Sakurasou?"

"I'm the one that wants to know."

"If you don't hurry up, it'll be too late."

By the way it felt, it was already too late. The memory of being trapped in a cage like a panda and attracting others' attention at the cafeteria, was still fresh. That time when he was with Mashiro, confirmed Sorata's relation with Sakurasou, and it became news that spread in the school. It wasn't weird that Sorata wanted to sigh.

"I've already given you a warning."

The only reason why he was still intact with the class was because of people like Nanami who were with Sorata since the first year and thus would at least talk to him. He wanted to thank them.

Anyways, Sorata placed his palms together, and prostrated himself before Nanami.

"What? Are you playing around with me?"

Nanami's ice-cold eyes stared at Sorata.

"No, I'm only trying to convey my thankfulness."

"If you do too many things for unknown reasons, be careful that people don't say 'no wonder he's from Sakurasou'."

It would be really bad if it was like that. But Sorata could only keep prostrating his hands.

Nanami was still looking at Sorata with the same ice-cold eyes.

"What are you looking at?"

"No, I'm just wondering if I had anything to ask you for."

"What use is it to ask me things like this?"

"Just joking. I obviously remember what I needed to ask you for."

"What idiot are you pretending to be?!"

"Occasionally, I would play dumb. If I tsukkomi'd too much, my mentality wouldn't be balanced."

"Who cares about your mentality? What do you need me for?"

"Misaki-senpai has a request for you."

"Hearing you say that, does that mean her new work is done?"

"Only the animation."

"How was it?"

"That person's brain indeed has problems. It was really good, so good that it gave me chills."

"... I see. Yeah, I would really want to dub it... I would really want to, but..."

Her tone and speech had intentions of declining.

"If you don't want to do it, just reject and it'll be fine."

"No, I really want to do it. It was the same as last time, if I wasn't here, most likely there wouldn't be a chance like this."

Nanami was part of the crew for the Misaki-produced DVD Animation that made a Mega-sale of a hundred-thousand copies. Of course, she had also requested help from the senpais from the drama sector in the university department.

"It's only a little..."

"Only a little what?"

"I doubt that I could really manage it. Won't it attract a lot of attention?"

"If Misaki-sempai has already requested for Nanami, then why not?"

"Actually I have no idea how to communicate with Kamiigusa-sempai and I can't figure out what she is directing. Will you translate for me?

"When did I become the translator?"

"You're not coming?"

"No, I'll come."

"Then, you can become the translator."

"Yeah, yeah. What you said is true. I'll send a reply to her, okay?"

"Yeah, if you don't mind."

"I'll contact her right away."

Sorata took his phone out to text and—

— I love you!

Misaki's message was followed by the military music of a promoted soldier. Sorata replied her.

— Let's break up.

After that, he totally ignored her. The soldier got promoted again. But it would just be a waste of money to text her back, so he just stopped replying to her.

Nanami looked at Sorata as though she had something to say.

"What grudge do you still hold against me?"

"How is Hikari doing?"

"Better than good. His shoulders grew well."

He showed the picture on his phone.

"Somehow it feels like he has become bigger."

Sorata had already spent close to a year with the white cat Hikari.

Since meeting him during mid June last year, he had grown used to the school and the dormitories.

It had been after school back then and there were a few other cats along with Hikari abandoned outside the school gate. A few dozen students crowded around, saying things like 'it's so cute!' and 'how pitiful', but no one took the initiative to help them.

Coincidentally, Sorata walked past and Nanami had been with him was well.

Having abandoned cats as the topic of the crowd wasn't something that made Sorata happy. To get rid of that uneasiness, he took all of them back to the dormitory .

Back then, he would have never imagined that it would lead to the school booting him out of the dorms.

"Give me this."

Without Sorata's consent, she used the infrared on his phone and stole the picture.

"It was mine originally."

"And..."

Nanami looked away, like she still had something to say. The cat topic might have just been the bait.

"Yeah?"

"The new student."

"Oh."

"Is she in school?"

"Yeah."

"How?"

"[...]"

"Why are you not speaking?"

"I don't know what to say."

"She's cute, right?"

"Yeah."

"She's really cute, right? I caught a glimpse of her a while ago."

"Under normal circumstances it would be like that."

"And to Sorata?"

"Like an unknown meeting."

"Yeah. I see."

Nanami shifted her head away out of boredom.

"I'm trying to say that it's bad."

"Why do you need to explain."

Nanami looked towards the corridor. Her eyes suddenly flashed in surprise.

Sorata, who was lying down on the table, looked up.

A boy whose name he didn't remember yet looked at him.

"Oi, Kanda, someone's looking for you."

Because of Sakurasou's notoriety, he remembered Sorata's name.

Mashiro walked towards Sorata from behind that boy's back.

Sorata couldn't help but scream 'ah!', and sit up in alertness.

Just by stepping into the classroom, Mashiro changed the surrounding air.

The crowd gathered in commotion and made space between Sorata and Mashiro.

To those who didn't know her, they would have just thought that she's a very cute transfer student.

Mashiro's existence had already become the news of the year during those four months. Not only was she a talented young artist, she also had an exceptional air about her that no one else had experienced before. Thus, anyone would be interested. Furthermore, she was living in Sakurasou.

Even so, the reason why no one ever asked Sorata anything about Mashiro was probably the 'you're not allowed to talk about her' feeling that Sorata emitted.

Just now, Nanami was the first one to talk to Sorata about Mashiro.

Mashiro looked at Sorata.

"Sorata, I'm hungry."

"Ah? What are you talking about?"

"I want to eat a Baumkuchen."

"Why do you need to tell me?"

"You don't have it?"

"Of course not!"

"But Rita would always give me one."

"Who's that?!"

"How regrettable."

Mashiro's stomach made a cute 'guchi, guchi' sound and she was preparing to leave the classroom.

She stopped at the door and reluctantly looked at Sorata.

"I trusted you."

The other students' lines of vision were like needles poking through Sorata.

Mashiro walked lethargically, with her back showing her sadness.

If this continued Sorata would be taken for a boy that was cold and merciless towards a girl, and his future two years of high school life would sink into despair. It was already bad enough that he lived in Sakurasou.

"Okay! Okay! I get it! It's my fault!"

Sorata dragged Mashiro along and rushed out of the classroom.

"Wait! Kanda! The fourth period's starting!"

The moment when Nanami reminded him, the bell rung. And Mashiro's stomach churned as well.

"I'll get back as soon as possible, so just make a random excuse to help me get out!"

"Don't request something like that from me!"

Sorata had decided to skip the fourth period's lession, to bring Mashiro to the snack counter.

Big clouds floated in the blue sky.

Sorata and Mashiro were the only ones in the top floor classroom during the lesson.

Sorata laid down on a long bench. Mashiro sat besides him, slicing the Baumkuchen and ate it piece-by-piece.

One could say that this exceeded an illusion, exceeded imagination, exceeded logic.

At first he had thought that the hardships were only at the beginning, Mashiro would start to get used to her new life and rules. Sorata had had such naïve hopes.

He suddenly thought of all that transpired these two weeks.

If he let her use the washing machine and looked away for just a moment, Mashiro would throw in the entire box of washing powder and the whole place would just end up in bubbles and foam. It was really difficult to clean it up. Sorata had really wished that he could have removed the detergent from the washing powder back then.

If he asked her to tidy up the bathroom, she would end up getting soaked. He really could not understand whether she was washing the bathroom or getting washed by it.

If he let her out to buy things herself, she would get lost as though it was natural. Luckily, Chihiro had given her a mobile phone with a GPS. However, she would not even answer even if Sorata called, so in the end Sorata still had to go pick her up.

And there were many other headache-causing situations of that degree.

The greatest problem of all was, however, that Mashiro had no sense of self-consciousness.

She thought that she was no different from ordinary people.

Also, because of that it was impossible to ask her to remember things or make her get used to them.

Everyday Sorata would find new truths, and the problems only kept increasing and never decreased.

"Shiina, what's your fourth period's lesson?"

"P.E."

"Is it alright to skip?"

"I could only learn the basics if it's volleyball."

"Why? Are you feeling unwell? Or are you injured?"

"My fingers cannot get hurt."

Although the answer was not something in Sorata's field of understanding, it somehow sounded very convincing.

The creator of all those amazing works, were Mashiro's white and slender fingers.

"But I think playing volleyball is fine, though."

"And?"

"But my teacher said no."

"That sounds serious."

"Yeah. Even though volleyball sounds serious, I still can't."

Sorata wanted to say that he did not mean that, but he kept quiet instead.

"The Rita that you mentioned just now, who's that?"

"Friend."

"A friend you had in England?"

Mashiro gently nodded her head.

"Roommate."

"You must have brought her a lot of trouble, huh?"

"I like Rita."

"Why is it that you never match our conversations?!"

Sorata straightened his back and sat up.

"Shiina, you really know how to draw."

"No such thing."

"No, really. You really know how to draw. I saw that piece that you got a something prize for. Even though I don't really understand art, I was really taken into it by its beauty and attractiveness."

"..."

"If it's learning art, wouldn't it be better if you had stayed overseas?"

"Yeah."

"Then why did you return to Japan?"

Maybe it is good as well if she returns here when she wants to study at a university.

No, if she really wanted to develop her skills fully, it would have been better if she stayed overseas.

Mashiro took the last piece of Baumkuchen, put it in her mouth and drank the milk tea that was in an aluminium can with a straw.

Looks like the topic ended like this

— Then, at the same time Sorata had that thought...

"I want to be a mangaka[31]."

Mashiro said it very clearly.

Not 'I wish to become a mangaka' or 'I'm aiming to become a mangaka as my goal'.

But she wanted to *be* a mangaka.

"WHY?!"

Sorata's voice was so loud that he himself was taken back by surprise.

Become a mangaka. This answer was one of the possibilities after seeing the sketches this morning. But it was a possibility with an around one percent chance. He still thought that it was impossible, a no-way answer.

In Sorata's field of understanding, it really was unacceptable.

Mashiro had the ability to attract so much attention in the world of art, and that talent surpassed the concepts of greatness that Sorata knew.

Even the art prize judge had commented that she was a prodigy.

Wasn't that enough? Mashiro already had the things that no matter how much normal people wanted it, they could never get it. To prove herself, it could be said she had a unique talent that no one else had. Then, why did she want to become a mangaka?

"Meaning you want to do both?"

Mashiro shook her head to show her disagreement.

"You only want to be a mangaka?"

This time she nodded her head instead.

"Sorry, I can't understand."

Like what he said, Sorata raised his hands in a surrendering position and lay down like that.

"You two! You guys are actually skipping class in broad daylight!"

The person who opened the door on the roof top forcefully was Chihiro.

She stood beside Sorata's head where he was lying and folded her arms in front of her chest. She looked down upon him.

"Wait, Sensei, please don't come so close to me! I'll see it!"

Chihiro wore a tight skirt, so it wouldn't be so easy to see it.

"Getting excited just by seeing a pair of panties, I really envy you!"

"I'll definitely turn to stone if I see Sensei's panties!"

He started to panic.

"Stop saying dumb things. Return to your lessons quickly."

After finishing the milk tea, Mashiro stood up from the bench.

She walked towards the school all by herself.

"Kanda as well."

"Sensei, can I ask you a question?"

"Yeah?"

"What kind of person is Shiina?"

His line of vision chased the back view he could no longer see. Sorata stared at the door.

The Chihiro who turned her head back at Sorata, looked like she wanted to test him out.

"I have absolutely no idea what she's thinking."

"Its not like we can help it. Because while you were learning how to laugh, cry and feel angry, Mashiro had already started to draw."

"Is her family background like that?"

"Her dad was gifted enough to be a lecturer at the England University of Arts. It's just that as a painter he wasn't that famous. Her mother graduated from an art university too, so maybe you can call it an 'artist' family. They are all in England now."

"Even then, she shouldn't have been that messed up, right?"

"Who knows. If I had learnt to use my drawings as a way to express myself before I learned the way to express myself by sounds or emotions, she might not be so difficult to understand."

Chihiro said all this light-heartedly and it made Sorata's thoughts come to a halt.

In other words: Shiina Mashiro was just different from others.

She lived in the world of art. Most likely it was something like that.

"Is that why she doesn't know how to laugh?"

"That too is a talent."

"Then, is using her talent to draw manga good?"

"That's Mashiro's problem; I have no idea."

"But..."

"I know what you want to say, but so what? If she can successfully become an awesome mangaka, isn't it as good, then?"

"...It isn't hard to imagine her parents opposing, huh?"

"Until now, no. Because she didn't tell them the real reason she came to Japan for. On the surface, it looks like she studies abroad to integrate the things in Japan into her works.

"Wow~. What an irresponsible adult. What happens if they find out?"

"That's not something you should interfere with. It's a problem between Mashiro and her family. Wait, no. It should be Mashiro's own problem. Even though I did help her to get to Japan, the rest is not something related to me, including the question of whether or not she can become a mangaka."

"How casual."

"Stop worrying about others' problems, just hand in your career survey."

"Oh, so you still remember."

"If you keep not handing it in, I'll get nagged by that class rep."

Sorata really hoped that she would just forget about it.

To evade her vision, Sorata looked into the sky. The gigantic pieces of white clouds had already scattered and disappeared.

"Must I really have something I want to do?"

Chihiro said 'hm!' and started laughing.

"Even though it's only a voluntary inspection, but after seeing you, I feel that it has more meaning to it now."

"Ah? You mean it had no meaning originally?"

"It must be to excavate those students who wrote ' anyway, just get promoted first', eh? To give a sense of competition among the teachers."

"*sigh*..."

"You'll know when you become an adult. After the ' anyway just' if it's 'drink a beer first', then it'll be enough. "

At the same time, the bell signalling the end of the fourth period went off.

Chihiro looked like she wanted to say something but gave up on it and left the roof top instead.

"~In the future~"

It was still undecided now.

There was no progress today either.

Even then, Sorata was still searching for it whole-heartedly.

"Anyway, let's eat first."

3

During the Golden Week[32] Sorata had been waiting for, he didn't go anywhere for fun or went back to his home at Fukuoka. Instead, he spent his time with Misaki's sound recording and taking care of Mashiro. Days went by quickly and the final day off had arrived. It was the fifth of May —Children's Day. It was already ten at night. Sorata had a leisure bath, tasting the feeling of

an empty mind. When he walked out of the washroom, a cabbage garden appeared before him. Green balls lined through both sides of the corridor like guiding lights in a runway.

"I really must be exhausted", Sorta said, closing his eyes and shaking his head.

It was too early for him to be hallucinating. Nevertheless, when he opened his eyes, things didn't happen the way he wanted them to: The cabbage garden was still there.

"Had aliens initiated their invasion at last? Earth is done for."

He couldn't believe aliens would do such detestable and childish stuff. Those aliens might be cabbage people who had come from the planet of cabbage. Maybe not — There was only one person who would do such a stupid thing in the entire universe. The culprit was the weirdo Sakurasou was so proud of —Kamiigusa Misaki. There were similar events that had happened a year ago. When it was Halloween Sakurasou had been decorated by orange pumpkins that came out of nowhere. During this period, Misaki would wear special costumes in all day.

For example, she would be dressed as a witch in school and have quarrels with the life guidance teacher almost every day. When it was Christmas, she would plant a fir tree in the courtyard, decorated with many lights. Adults nearby would come and complain; whereas children would cry out in delight when they saw the scene. She would even wear a mini-skirt and put on a Santa costume that day, distributing presents everywhere on the street elatedly, even to strangers. These memories were recalled in his mind one by one. Be it the New Year, the Hinamatsuri[33], the culture festival, or the sports festival, she would be in high spirits and do whatever she wanted without paying any heed to the troubles she brought to others —Sorata had helped her to eradicate the aftermath of many troubles she had brought upon herself over the year.

"But why cabbages?"

As far as Sorata knew, celebrating with cabbages was not a custom on Children's Day. The guide lights of the cabbages directly extend to Jin's room. Following the cabbages to Jin's room, Sorata stood before the door and knocked on it, however, there was no response.

"I'm coming in."

The door wasn't locked and Sorata easily entered —He had entered the kingdom of cabbage. Even more cabbages filled the room, the smell of cabbages irritating his sense. The bed, the table, the bookshelf that marked the black trendiness of Jin's room were now all gone. Jin's kingdom was completely invaded by the green cabbages.

"What a disaster."

He couldn't see the culprit behind this green country though; he could only see a large wooden box used for holding goods placed on the bed. Approaching the box, he could hear faintly sleeping and breathing sounds. He knew what it contained without even the need to check.

"Misaki-san. What are you doing in someone else's room?"

"The question should be directed at you. What are you doing in my room?"

Almost shrieking, Sorata turned his head around to see Jin standing behind him impatiently.

"It's not my fault."

"I know. It's Misaki's", Jin said, heaving a deep sigh, palming his face with a single hand.

"I had an early foreboding that Misaki would do something like this this year. Indeed, I was right."

"Is there a custom on Children's Day of using cabbages as decorations?"

"There must be a custom like this in our big, wide universe, I guess", Jin replied uninterested while entering his room.

"Did something like this happen last year?"

"Yeah. When I entered the room, I saw Misaki decorating herself with cream waiting for me inside", Jin said, unwilling to tell the tale.

"Have my deepest condolence for your tragedy."

Jin walked to Sorata's side, glancing at the box on his bed.

"Is it your birthday today, Jin-senpai?"

"I'm afraid yes."

"Then I get it now. But why cabbages?"

"Perhaps green is a beautiful colour? Who knows what Misaki is thinking."

"Aren't you guys childhood friends?"

Jin looked as if he wanted to say something, but then he restrained himself, letting only a wry laugh. Jin and Sorata then looked at the box together.

"Um. I'll excuse myself here now."

Jin placed his hand on Sorata's shoulder.

"Don't you want to lend a hand to your senpai who has been taking care of you for so long?"

"You haven't taken care of me any bit!"

"No. I did. I treated you to lunch."

"That was only once! Let go of me!"

Jin grasped Sorata's shoulders to the point Sorata's shoulders hurt.

"You dare let me touch this dangerous thing alone. Have you gone nuts?"

"You're the one who has gone nuts for pulling someone else into this stuff. It wouldn't explode, I guess. It's fine!"

"You're just guessing! It's just a guess!"

"Then, I'm sure it won't! At least from a physical point of view, that is."

"You're so irresponsible to say that! Do you mean it'll explode mentally?"

They could imagine what the contents held, so neither of them wanted to open it.

"If it's a birthday present, then please take it with gratitude! No, please take it bravely and determined!"

"Sorata, you're the kind of a person who would even help kittens or Mashiro, but never me. How deplorable. I put my trust in you all this time, you know."

"My instincts are ringing! They're telling me I would see stuff I shouldn't see if I open it! They're roaring in my heart right now!"

"Forget it. If that's what you say, then let's do it in another way."

"What do you have in mind?"

Jin let loose of his hand that was put on Sorata's shoulder, but Sorata didn't escape. Jin then quickly and mightily opened the door.

"Woah! What are you doing?!"

"Haha. Who told you to fall for it so easily?"

"This line is exactly what the villains say!"

It was the human's instinct to see stuff they didn't want to see. Misaki was inside the box. For an instant, his vision went black. When he thought that something bad had happened, he realised Jin had covered his head with a towel, preventing him from seeing what was in front of him.

"Sorata, you shouldn't look."

Even if it was short glance, the strong picture was still burnt into his retina. Misaki, sleeping comfortably, was holding a head of cabbage. There were only a catching red ribbon that covered her whole body. Her breasts, well-rounded thighs, were all shown. The most surprising thing was the ratio of her organs along with her lips covered in glossy lipstick accentuated her sexiness.

"Ah. Eh? What happened to the space war?", Misaki said in her sleep, slowly waking up.

Sorata looked up from the crevice of the towel. When Misaki saw Jin, she flashed with abnormal gleam.

"Jin, happy birthday!"

As if catching its prey, Misaki flew out of the box. In a split second, Jin evaded Misaki's catch. Misaki then crashed into some cabbages as a result, but she revived immediately like a phoenix.

"Jin, happy birthday!"

Misaki flew again, yet Jin pulled the sheets and quickly wrapped her up using her trajectory.

“It hurts my eyes! Please stop it!”

“My, Jin, you don’t have to be so embarrassed. I’ve put much effort into this to celebrate your birthday. Why can’ t you feel happy?”

“Please, celebrate my birthday with the customs of Earth.”

“Um. I’ll excuse myself now”, Sorata said, finding the right timing to squeeze into their conversation.

It was about time to return to the normal world. If he were to stay in the kingdom of cabbages any longer, his mind might turn whack.

“Oh, wait! Do you want to escape? Sorata!”

“It’s enough!”

“These cabbages can only be eaten with gusto by the staff. You’re going to help, right?”

“I don't belong to the staff! I have to go!”

At this moment, Mashiro came in.

“Sorata.”

“Uh. What’s the matter?”

Mashiro had taken her bath before Sorata, yet her hair was still all soaked up, giving off a sweet scent. Even when she was wearing pajamas, she would properly wear her pants. This could probably be attributed to Sorata’s efforts in teaching her every day.

“I have something to ask your help for.”

“Sure. Let’s go then!”

Shaking Jin off, Sorata swiftly left the room.

“You two childhood friends should get along sometimes! I wish you good luck!”

“Hey, Misaki, stop pulling me! Please wear your clothes now! It might fall off any minute!”

"I'm the birthday present. I'll be troubled if you don't receive it!"

Before Jin could say something else, Sorata had left the room and shut the door. He spoke a little prayer for him afterwards. Still delving in the joy of getting off from that danger, Sorata caught Mashiro and briskly went upstairs. "I'm saved", Sorata thought as he entered Mashiro's room.

"Take them off", Mashiro said with a dead serious look.

Sorata was frozen to the spot. He repeatedly winked.

"Take them off."

Unfortunately, he didn't mishear it. To pick up his emotions, Sorata averted his eyes everywhere around the room. On the floor was a pile of clothes, underwear, and drafts. Whether he was on the first or the second floor, they all seemed like hell in their own way.

"Okay. Let me hear your reason."

“I want to look at you naked.”

“I’m asking for the reason you want to look at me naked.”

“It’s a long story.”

“Is this the attitude you should have when asking for someone’s help?”

“Wait a moment.”

Mashiro took a memo from the desk.

“Advise from Ayano.”

Who’s Ayano? Don’t say it like it was an advise for me !”

“Editor.”

“Oh, so you have en editor now.”

Mashior’s eyes affirmed what he said.

“I participated in the freshman’s competition last year. ”

"Did you get a prize?"

"I lost."

It was easy to know the answer, because Mashiro hadn't published anything yet.

"Ayano who took a look at my works said they were great."

"Oh, I understand now. But what attitude are you having now?"

"I'm going to join the competition again this year."

"Can you still join when you already have an editor?"

"Seems so."

"Okay."

It should be better to gain fame through winning a prize than to publish stuff with a name that no one knew. From the publisher's standpoint, the most important thing was to produrce popular works that increased the sales. Certainly they would want to train potential freshman.

“So, what did the editor say?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m talking about the advice you just told me!”

“Do we still have to continue that?”

“It hasn’t even started! Please don’t forget it!"

Mashiro looked down at the memo.

“This was the advice Ayano gave me.”

“So we’re really starting from the beginning again?”

“If subtle emotions...”

“Yes.”

“...would trouble you...”

“Yes.”

“...then go for...”

“What?”

"...extreme stuff."

"Okay."

"This is what she said."

"So this is why you want to draw the a male's naked body? There are some female manga in which things are more tense... But that wasn't a long story, was it?"

"Today's goal is Sorata's body."

"That puts it in a pointlessly pervy way, you know?"

"Take them off."

Mashiro grabbed Sorata's shirt by its hem.

"I refuse to."

Sorata shook her off.

"I've stated my reasons."

"It's because I know them that I feel the dangers ahead of me! Do you want me to be a model?!"

"A naked one."

"By the way: Do you mean completely naked? It would be embarrassing to be."

"It would be fine."

"How is it fine?"

"I won't feel embarrassed."

"But I will!"

"I won't tease you."

"What do you want to tease at though?"

"You're against it no matter what?"

"That can't be helped."

After Sorata heaved a sigh, Mashiro put her hands on her pajamas.

"Shiina-san, what are you doing?"

"I'm going to take my clothes off too. How about this?"

"It's not the problem!"

"It would be all right if you would've taken them off in the beginning."

"Oh, please don't say it with a 'you're so embarrassed' tone, all right? And please don't take your own clothes off without a second thought! Young girls can't show their naked body in front of others easily!"

"Sorata is special to me."

"I won't ask you why I'm special at this moment! Are you going to say something random again? I'm only a person who gave you baumkuchen, right?!"

"Right."

"I told you to stop talking about that! You've made me agonise about my own value. Also, please don't take them off!"

Mashiro stopped.

"Are you willing to take them off for me?"

It was a human being's first choice of stripping someone else or being stripped off.

"Like hell would there be this kind of diktat... Alright. I'll take them off, but I won't take off my underwear! This is my last offer!"

"I'll take off your underwear for you."

"What kind of logic is that?! Your brain is definitely malfunctioning! Listen, okay? Do *not* take them off!"

"[...]"

"Why do you look like you're not satisfied?"

"Because what is going to happen is the most important."

"You won't draw to that extent in a manga, will you?"

"You don't have confidence."

"Where do I not have confidence?"

Sorata, who only thought of ending this as soon as possible, took off his t-shirt and sports pants in the room, leaving only a pair of trunks on him and nothing else.

"Um... Can't you get a male's naked body through photos or images?"

"No."

"Why?"

"I won't know the texture."

"[...]"

"[...]"

"I wouldn't be able to feel its texture."

"Please let me return to the countryside."

Sorata took his t-shirt and put it back on in a panic, though Mashiro grabbed it by the collar to stop him.

"Knowing the texture is important. It blows life into the drawing."

Mashiro gazed at Sorata bluntly, calming Sorat'a's mind strangely. After all, it was work instead of a prank. She was serious here, and not teasing him.

"Okay, okay. I'll do it! How should I do it?"

"Lay down."

Mashiro pointed at the bed. Even though Sorata was still a bit reluctant, he knew the bed hadn't been slept on by Mashiro since she slept under the table. Thus, he went to the bed, laid down, and waited for further instructions . As a result, out of his expectation, Mashiro bent her knees and straddled Sorata's body.

"What do you want to do?"

"Don't move."

Mashiro's long and thin fingers started to stroke his abdomen muscles, giving him a cold shiver. Along with the strange shiver that made his outer muscles tense and rigid, his inner ones relaxed.

"It feels hard and rigid."

Mashiro's body was very soft. Through the overly thin pajamas, he could feel her buttocks and thighs. The places that touched her body raised in temperature. He felt very comfortable with the sweat coming out because of the heat. He wanted to have more contact with her body, especially with his hands. His evil desire started to gradually occupy his heart, but when he met his eyes with Mashiro's, his desire would cool down swiftly like a balloon losing its air. Looking at her serious face, Sorata gave up on saying the words he wanted to say. Mashiro's fingers crossed over Sorata's neck to his chin. Sorata was completely under her control. Afterwards, Mashiro moved her body even closer to him. She placed her chin on Sorata's chest, looking up at him.

"Your heart is still beating."

"Because I'm still alive."

"Your heartbeat seems to have accelerated."

"Who's fault do you think this is?"

"Embrace me."

"No."

"You're useless."

"Alright. I know!"

Sorata stretched his hands around Mashiro's back, touching her softly at first.

"Please press harder."

Sorata pressed a bit harder with his shoulders, his body shivering in nervousness. His shoulders could feel Mashiro's waist —It was very thin. He started to worry if he were to hold here with more force, her waist would just snap.

"It's okay now."

Sorata let go of his hands. Mashiro sat up, staring directly at Sorata's face.

"Are you excited now?"

"Like hell I would!"

Sorata could see some part of her breasts through her open collar. Thus, Sorata quickly averted his eyes in a panic.

"What's wrong?"

"You should have at least some self-conscious. Your self-defence is too weak."

Mashiro looked at her breasts.

“Don’t you like them?”

“If I were excited by your breasts, I could sleep with a washboard all night long.”

Failing to understand what he meant, Mashiro gave no response.

“Sorata, have you ever made love before?”

“[...]”

“Sorata?”

“You scared the shit out of me! Of course not! Not even kissing. I’ve never even joined hands with a girl, though my stomach was sat on by one!”

“It’s a shame if you don’t. Your body figure is so good.”

“What logic is this? This is just because I have played football when I was in primary and middle school.”

“How about now?”

"No. Isn't it obvious?"

After I joined high school, I had never joined any clubs , going back home straight after school.

"Did you have an injury?"

"No."

Sorata fell into silence, whereas Mashiro began thinking.

"Then, you can start over again."

"There are many other reasons apart from having an injury."

"I don't understand."

It perturbed Sorata to be looked at with such pure eyes . He wavered his vision, finding things he could look at, but he couldn't find any. The face of Mashiro that seemed to be looking for an answer was apparently the reflection of her inability to speak what is appropriate in different situations. She couldn't even feel that Sorata wanted to change the subject. Helpless, Sorata could only tell her the truth.

"That is because it couldn't be my goal."

Though nine years passed without much notice, he didn't really have an explicit goal to pursue. When he had been in middle school, he would feel great for participating in area-based competitions or prefectural tournaments, but he wasn't a very smart player, so he could hardly imagine getting even better or participating in even larger competitions. When he was in primary school, he would dream of participating in a competition on the green football field under stadium lights. But ever since he graduated from primary school, he didn't have these dreams anymore.

"You can say I've reached my limits in this, and hence my passion has cooled down."

He wouldn't feel regret for losing a match. And he would often slack off being absent-minded, even though when he was small, he would cry when losing a match. The sports teams in Suikou weren't exceptionally strong. Be it as it may, the football team still aimed for the nationals, and the baseball team for the Koushien. He knew there was a meaning to believing in oneself and doing one's best, but he just couldn't summon his passion again. So he gave up on it. He wanted to search

for something he wouldn't find limits in and believed he could challenge —Like the students in the same grade as him who sweat all over themselves in the sports fields every day. Over the time, Sorata didn't join any clubs. And gradually had lost his whole year with nothing accomplished.

"Forget it. I said something weird again."

The words he said were meaningless to Mashiro. Mashiro had only seen the summits of the Earth: She wouldn't understand normal people who tried to climb up these mountains.

"Is that so?", Mashiro replied concisely. Flipping open the sketchbook she had prepared, she sat on Sorata's body, flipped to a page meant for Sorata and started drawing.

"Shiina? Do I have to stay like this?"

"[...]"

"This is the worst type of neglecting someone. Hey!"

"[...]"

She seemed like she didn't hear Sorata's voice. She had a different demeanour from moments ago, concentrating in her own world of drawing.

"Shiina, have you ever had a boyfriend?"

"[...]"

"That much's obvious, isn't it~"

"[...]"

"...Bad, too bad. My life is too tragic and bad. What kind of a punishing game is this? Help. I want to cry now ."

After a while, Mashiro suddenly stood up, turned on the computer and sat before the table. She then started to draw on the screen with the tablet.

"This must be how being violated feels like. Why was I born?"

As Sorata heaved a sigh, he put on his clothes and peeked at the screen behind Mashiro's back. Every time Mashiro's hands moved, a male character would be stunningly drawn on the screen. She didn't redraw, as if

she knew where everything should lie. The way her hands scribbled was like magic to Sorata. Suddenly, he felt Mashiro was gradually leaving him. She was just before him, at a distance his hands could reach, but the distance he felt looked like infinity. To shake off this weird feeling, Sorata picked up the scattered drafts. The content was different this time, but the atmosphere in whole was similar. It was about an overly normal female high school student falling in love with another overly normal male student, having overly dull conversations and beginning their love story.

"Um. What is this actually?"

It looked as if there was no improvement. The characters were too ordinary, which was fatal in mangas. Their expressions had to be more exaggerated and bold. The low-energy atmosphere at a whole would just made the manga boring. If the pictures had no life, it couldn't convey feelings. No one would get this after they had read it. This wasn't a manga but mere drawings. Readers didn't read manga for the beautiful illustrations, but for manga itself. This was what Sorata reckoned at least. So, if the content was too boring, no one would spend time reading it. It would be difficult to get a prize or start publishing stuff at this level. As Sorata thought, he lifted

his head from the drafts, happening to find Mashiro looking directly at him.

"Are they boring?"

"To be honest: Yes."

Even though he hesitated, wondering whether he should skimp her or not, he resorted to telling her frankly. He had given his advice bluntly before. There was no meaning to lying to her now.

"Ayano said this too."

As Sorata felt he shouldn't be blabbering much about this, he silently returned the drafts.

"You can take care of them."

"Is it okay? They are manuscripts after all."

"I have a copy of them. Besides, they are just drafts."

"Ah?"

Drafts were the basic structure of mangas. They were drawn by pencils and would be used in discussions with the editor to decide what should be adopted.

"If you draw it like the finished draft, it would be inefficient."

"This is because I'm not too used to drawing with the computer. I'm still practicing."

"But why not paper?"

"Ayano said that if I use paper, there would be too many lines. The drawings would be too heavy."

"Would it be that you have drawn them too well?"

"No. It's because I'm not very skilled with drawing people."

Sorata couldn't get why she said she wasn't skilled. The lines used to draw the characters on the screen were even less than what he saw before, seemingly like a well-practised manga style. Mashiro's drawing strength should be about the top in the industry. Besides, there were a lot of mangas with worse drawings out there. Be

that as it may, she still claimed she wasn't good at this. He couldn't help but wonder if there was something wrong in her head. The feeling of averting his eyes rushed into him once again: Mashiro's drawing appearance slipped away from him quickly. This wasn't a misperception: Mashiro was heading to her destination directly, her speed in Sorata's eyes the same as the speed of light. There was no way he could catch up to her. Even though they were in the same room, Mashiro was indisputably in a different place from the where he was in. Misaki, Jin, and Ryuunosuke too, were heading to their respective destinations. The only one standing in his original position was him. An aching that came out of nowhere went through his chest, causing him pain. Sorata left Mashiro subconsciously and sat on the bed. Since some time loneliness and fear had been stirring up in his stomach. Feeling perturbed, Sorata said to Mashiro : "Say, why did you choose manga?"

"[...]"

He indeed didn't get any response. It was not only because she was too concentrated on her work that she didn't hear his voice, but also that she had even forgotten his presence. Silence filled the room for a while, with only quick scribbling sounds of the drawing pen

comfortably reverberating in his ears, stealing away his ability to think. He couldn't think anything; he merely looked at Mashiro's back blankly for a long while.

"Because it's interesting."

A sound of astonishment leaked out of Sorata's mouth upon this belated reply.

"Eh?"

Mashiro turned her head around to him.

"Because it's interesting."

"Can't you just draw pictures?"

"Drawing pictures isn't interesting."

"It's not good to say such things."

"It's the truth."

"Um... If you don't mind, then please give me your artistic abilities."

"Sure."

"How can that possibly happen?"

"It's what you said."

He was certain of these things.

"It's Sorata who wants something he doesn't want."

Sorata was nailed right at his wound. He had no idea of what he wanted to do. Even if he acquired a skill, the skill would only deteriorate in his hands. Mashiro immediately turned her head back and continued her work. It was as if they hadn't talked moments ago. Her back appeared apathetic to him. It was as if he was rejected. Nevertheless, this wasn't the truth. It was because of Sorata being timid and shy that she caught him in a bad position. Mashiro did not have any feelings or thoughts. It was only Sorata who lamented over his proposition of letting her talent be his. He was such a jerk . He murmured in his mouth. He hated himself for knowing nothing about himself.

"Sorata."

"What?"

"You can't put on your clothes."

"Ah?"

"We're still continuing."

"Hold on a minute. What do you want to do to me now?"

"It's really..."

"...Really what?"

"...Really difficult to tell."

"Then don't ask me to do it!"

"I won't let you sleep tonight."

"You should have said this line sexier!"

"I will not let you sleep tonight."

"It's just the same!"

4

Just like Mashiro had said, she didn't let Sorata sleep.Sorata was instructed to do all kinds of stuff on the

bed or become her experiment for different poses, until five in the morning when Mashiro went to sleep. It was all thanks to this that Sorata could at last have a glance of what Shiina looked like when she fell asleep. He felt it was a wonder how she could creep below the table. Before the last moment she fell asleep, she was still drawing manga on the table. Then, she would slowly doze off, and would at last roll off the chair dexterously out of instinct. After that, to prevent the light shining on her, she would use her last strength to crawl on the floor into the stack of clothes and underwear. She didn't really sleep out of her own will but more like as a habit much like an animal, working until she wore herself out and fell asleep. She didn't even have the strength to crawl onto the bed but used the last drop of HP left in her in drawing. This is why her way of sleeping became so chaotic. Looking at Mashiro coiled and sleeping, Sorata drooped his shoulders.

"You shouldn't sleep in front of a boy. You're defenceless."

She had a sleeping face at complete ease. She hid her head but not her buttocks and feet. Sorata covered her with sheets, and she made an annoyed noise as if she felt itchy. Even though he wanted to throw a word or two of

complaint, it was too forlorn to speak to himself. Sorata could only walk out of the room, dragging along his heavy body. Fresh morning air filled the corridor of Sakurasou. Sorata just didn't have any residue power to feel this breeze though. Staggering downstairs, he knew his holiday had ended and he had to start school again tomorrow. Yet, Sorata was still thinking of going back to his room to sleep. If anyone were to know what happened to him, they would definitely sympathise with him. At this stage, he could sleep for the whole long day, Sorata thought, but he soon stopped, as he heard a voice. His puzzling mind told him it might be a thief, but he was too tired to be cautious. Sorata just followed the sound and went into the living room.

"No. I've repeated myself many times already: Misaki could not complete something with other groups. She was the person who would do everything on her mind, including cutting of scenes and drawing. Yes. I don't mean to occupy her alone. It's fine if you want to communicate with her directly. Anyway, I'm not her manager or anything. Please don't call me for this anymore!"

It was Jin who was shouting before the table. Turning off his phone and placing it on the table, leaning against

the chair slanted. Jin's eyes floated everywhere, spotting Sorata at some point.

"What's all your weary face about?"

"Shiina wouldn't let me sleep."

Sorata let out a big yawn. Infected by him, Jin also let out a yawn.

"I didn't imagine I would have an adult conversation with you so soon."

"I don't have any of your interests. I'm just aiding her in her manga production."

"What? Won't you feel shallow when you say this? You're a healthy high school boy."

"Don't mention it. It would just make me more depressed."

Jin's eyes also reflected Jin's tiredness.

"What about your birthday party?"

"Thanks for running away. I was left there having a cabbage carnival: Eating cabbage, and puking afterwards , and then eating cabbages again. The toilet has now become my loving comrade. When it was past four, I started to feel the round shape of the toilet was sexy."

"You're heavily sick."

"The cabbages left will be eaten tomorrow... Oh, it's today. I need to take them to the students at school."

Letting out a dry laugh, Jin would be imagining how it looked like to bring a large pack of cabbages with him to school. Sorata would inevitably be affected, so he wanted to reject him now.

"What was the phone call about?"

"It was the producer of an anime company who said he wanted to let Misaki make animes with better scripts. Nevertheless, it's obvious he wants the work to become his and uplift their fame."

"But why did he call at this time?"

"It's normal in this industry", Jin said, his eyes implying that Sorata should sit down.

Sorata sat down one seat away from Jin's. He wanted to sleep desperately, but he couldn't help but talk with Jin upon seeing him.

"What happened anyway?"

"How do I put it... Even though Shiina is chaos, she was really strong."

"Why do you mention this now?"

"I don't mean her talent in drawing but the way she concentrates on working. It's this feeling that ocurred to me."

"I see. So you would get all jittery when this appeared before you."

"[...]"

He didn't want to admit it, so he remained silent.

"It looks like it's only me who isn't capable of anything in Sakurasou."

Misaki produced animes. Jin wrote the scripts. Ryuunosuke worked as a programmer, Mashiro drew mangas. How about Kanda Sorata? What was he capable of? He didn't know what to become or what to do.

"You are mistaken."

"Eh?"

"I didn't write scripts because I believed it was the job of my life."

"Is that so?"

"I only started because of a bit of interest. Then, when I really started doing it, I felt it was even more interesting . I gradually felt it was pretty good, getting more serious and serious. It's probably this feeling that gave me the urge to continue. I'm not as good as Mashiro or Misaki, but perhaps when the time comes, or when a thought flashes in my mind, I would give it my all, though I won' t question why I do it. Yeah. That's about it."

"I don't even have that."

"That's just you braking. Just like how ramen shops start learning Chinese chilled noodles in the summer, you only need to do stuff you like."

"Please apologise to all the ramen shops in the country ."

"Of course it's Chinese chilled noodles if you want to start doing something."

"What logic is in there?"

"You're such a freak. I can't get you sometimes."

"I think I'm pretty normal compared to everyone else in Sakurasou."

"When you meet the affairs of others, you would act so swift as if it was a reflex. But when you meet your own affairs, you're as slow as a turtle."

"That's not true."

"Yes, it is. The masses will pretend they didn't see anything when they meet abandoned cats. You did. Also,

you've been taking good care of Mashiro all this month even when you're forced to do so. You would wake up early to make lunch for her and give her baumkuchen when she wants it. You would literally do anything to help her. If I were you, I wouldn't spend all my effort like you. Sorata, you're like a hero who lives to help others."

"This is because no one would help otherwise!"

"But...", Jin's tone lowered, "...you're asking for reasons. You would get others in your affairs before deciding stuff so you could blame them when you fail. I know it's painful if you don't do this, as it's all your fault if you fail. There's no escape."

"This isn't what I meant."

"If it's not, then please leave Sakurasou, Sorata."

Jin's sudden words made Sorata's heart bounce vibrantly. It can be said because it hit the right spot. To calm himself down, Sorata immediately found an excuse: "Shiina and the cats are still here. I can't help it."

"I'll help you find the cat's feeders and take on the job of taking care of Mashiro."

He couldn't just skimp him by just saying: "You're kidding, right?" Jin's razor-sharp eyes pierced through Sorata, not permitting him to avert his eyes. Those sharp eyes were telling him he couldn't escape.

"With that, all the problems would be solved, won't they?"

Jin shrugged his shoulders like joking around.

"No, but..."

"You know, I actually like you."

"I couldn't believe my life's first confession would come out from a guy's mouth."

"You're willing to get along with that troublesome Misaki, have a pretty good relationship with Ryuunosuke and even showed no hate to people like me who are hated by boys in general. You did well with Mashiro's affairs too. Besides, your retorting skills are pretty good."

"Well, let's form a comedy duo."

"Let's make it the dream of our next life, my comrade."

Jin smiled, but Sorata couldn't. Jin hadn't said the words he needed to. He had to prepare for the words awaiting him.

"If you can't decide on what to do, I'll help you, but at least choose where you'll stay! If you want to go back to the normal dormitories, go ahead."

"[...]"

"You know what I have to say. I'm not kidding. If you leave, I'll take care of Mashiro and the cats."

"Um..."

"So, make the decision yourself: Leave or stay. Don't take anyone as your excuse. If you can do this, then you can easily find your target. It's just a simple A or B decision."

Having that said, Jin stood up. Sorata couldn't lift up his head. He just stared at the table, his body not moving an inch. The sound of Jin's footsteps left him, though the inexplicable thing was that his presence didn't vanish

along with them. Sorata had lost his will to sleep. It was right that he wanted to leave Sakurasou and return to normal dormitories and let Jin take care of Mashiro and the cats since Sorata had no more reasons to stay at Sakurasou then. Wasn't this something to be happy about? He wanted it so badly. There were no reasons to be hesitating. But why did his breathing become difficult now? As if sinking into a swamp, he thrashed, trying to move his heavy hands and feet, though he couldn't find the route to exit it anywhere. Unable to take it anymore, Sorata lapsed onto the round table. It was depressing and painful. Time ticked away slowly.

"Sorata."

Suddenly a transparent voice reached him. It had a weak but clear tone. He realised the presence he had felt was not Jin but Mashiro. Not being able to even move his head, Sorata just lay there, his eyes closed.

"Are you going to leave?"

"It was my plan since the very start to leave", Sorata squeezed a voice, grasping his past self tightly.

Mashiro left the living room silently without leaving anything, not even a word.

"What the hell was this?"

He punched the table with his shivering hands, giving him a slight pain spreading out from the back of his hands. At this instant, Sorata woke up, but then he fell back down into a turbulent vortex of his own thought. Even pain had left him. All that was left was a sticky feeling similar to guilt, though he couldn't remember the name for it.

Chapter 3 - June is Melancholic

Part 1

"I can't sleep...."

After rolling around in his bed countless times, Sorata tried to express his situation with his face buried in his pillow.

Even if he did so, nothing would happen, and nothing will change either. He checked the time on his phone. Two o'clock at night. It's already been two hours since he tried to sleep.

Sorata had no choice, so he got up unwillingly and turned on the light.

The fluorescent light was too bright. His eyes couldn't adjust to the bright light and a sense of light-headedness hit him. His eyes were telling him to sleep, but his mind, for no apparent reason, was still extremely clear. This feeling very much prevented him from calming down.

The brown tabby, Tsubasa, raised its head in an annoyed manner. It glared at Sorata for a while, and then closed its eyes after giving off a big yawn. Futilely sitting up on his bed, Sorata curled up in a prayer-like position.

"I beg of you please share some sleepiness with me."

Even after closing his eyes for a while, he didn't feel sleepy at all. If anything, his brain worked harder trying to find the words to criticize his foolish action.

After sighing, he rubbed his eyes.

Why was he still unable to sleep, even though it was painful to keep his eyes open?

For the past week, every night was like this.

How do I fall asleep? And how did I fall asleep usually ?

After pondering about these meaningless things, his thoughts somehow starts to swifts towards the issue of

whether or not he should move out of Sakurasou. Knowing that the issue won't be resolved by just thinking about it makes him try to enter the world of dreams, but this process was repeated over and over again.

The answer was obvious.

He didn't know why he was even worrying about it. Worries give birth to new questions which then stomped Sorata down. He was losing his sleeping hours continuously.

"Ah, damn it!"

Not doing anything will result in him being too engaged in his own thoughts and have negative effects. So thinking that he should at least do something, he took down his laundry and he formed a little hill on his bed.

He started to fold them one by one with a lot of care. While he was folding, he didn't need to think at all. But

soon enough, he ran out of laundry to fold and only Mashiro's remained.

He folded the school blouse so that it wouldn't get creased, and he placed the black, school socks into pairs. He wanted to fold the remaining undergarments thoughtlessly, but after picking up the first item which happened to be a black laced camisole, Sorata faced instant loss.

It's just a piece of fabric.

Even when he told himself that he couldn't resist his instincts as a man, he foolishly imagined Mashiro wearing it, only to be feeling guilty instantly. As if it wanted to deliver the final blow, the next opponent was black panties which matched the black camisole. It was a complete loss. After gathering his thoughts, he inspected himself.

"If someone looks at me, most likely they'll think that I'm a pervert."

He quickly folded the ends and rolled the panties up. He

sandwiched the undergarments between the blouse and the towels so that they wouldn't be noticed. Even if it was certain that they would be all over the floor in Mashiro's room, regardless of Sorata helping to maintain order. Cleaning the room up was also Sorata's job as the person who has the Mashiro Duty.

If Sorata moved out of Sakurasou, Jin would be the one would have to be responsible for all these things. Jin would be used to touching undergarments and such, and wouldn't breakout in cold sweat like Sorata. No matter what the situation is, he would be able to pull through smartly. Jin was that kind of a guy. However, he didn't even want to imagine Jin taking care of Mashiro.

"But what am I even thinking about... This isn't it."

What he really should be thinking about was whether or not he should move out of Sakurasou. He had the duty, but this was his own issue, so Mashiro shouldn't have any effect on his decision. But for some reason, he was always thinking about Mashiro. When Sorata said that he was going to move out, Mashiro didn't show any emotions what so ever. Whether she was happy or upset,

it was the same as usual. So he didn't know what she was thinking.

Realizing that he wouldn't be able to keep his sanity while going around in circles in his head, he jumped up. If he couldn’t sleep, he could only stay awake. If he stayed in his room further, he thought something bad might happen to him, so he went to the kitchen to get a glass of water.

Surprisingly, someone was already there two o'clock at night. A shadow of someone sitting in front of the fridge filling up their stomach. It was pajama-clad Mashiro. She had a tired and a sleepy face, but she took out a carrot from the fridge and checked it carefully. She apparently didn't like it and placed back the snack which rabbits love, and took out a cucumber this time. Same as the carrot, she checked it over carefully, and thought about it for a few seconds. As soon as she finished thinking, she quickly took a bite at the cucumber.

"Are you a kappa[34]!"

Bitting on the cucumber, Mashiro turned to face Sorata

with a straight face. She didn't get surprised at all. She kept taking bites at the cucumber.

"Could it be that you're hungry?"

Mashiro nodded her head while eating the cucumber.

"I get it, so stop eating! I'll cook you something!"

Mashiro swallowed the cucumber.

"I'm not a kappa."

"I know that!"

Getting Mashiro to sit down at the kitchen table, he looked inside the fridge for Mashiro's sake. Recently, thanks to taking care of Mashiro, his cooking skills have improved and his menu increased as well. However,

cooking something at this hour would make Chihiro angry for sure, so he decided to settle with a cup ramen from the cupboard.

After boiling some water in an orange colored electric pot which Misaki bought, he poured the water in to the cup. He placed it on the table where Mashiro was waiting. Mashiro tried to eat the ramen as soon as the cup touched the table so he had to hold her back.

"Wait 3 minutes!"

To his surprise, it looked like she didn't know about cup ramen before. Sorata sat next to Mashiro. The 3 minutes of waiting felt longer than usual. Mashiro, who was intensely staring at the cup, didn't say a word. Sorata was unable to say anything either. It was clear why Mashiro was awake at this time. She was drawing her manga as usual. And she came out because she felt hungry.

This was Mashiro's daily life. After her arrival at Sakurasou, her usual activities didn't change much. She drew her manga until she almost fainted, got woken up

by Sorata and went to school, and when she comes back home, she locked herself inside her room and resumed drawing.

At her age, it is normal for a girl to gossip about having a boyfriend, or break up with a bad guy like him, or getting a really beautiful hairdo, or buying some clothes from some place, or going to the karaoke, or saying they're broke, or they need to go on a diet, or it's boring these days, or it's frustrating these days, or talking about someone behind their back all day, every day. But Mashiro disregards these things and worked towards her goal with her own hands. To Sorata, Mashiro was shining so much. It was almost painful to watch her. If there's a strong light in front of you, anyone would start to squint and pity themselves.

"Sorata."

"Ah, yeah. What?"

"3 minutes?"

"You can eat now."

Taking the lid off the cup ramen, Mashiro started to slurp away at its contents. Being uncomfortable with the silence, Sorata tried to speak.

"Say... that rookie awards which you mentioned before, when does it close?"

"... Towards the end of June."

"Right. I see."

"... Yeah."

It was about a month and a half away.

"Well you know... uh, there isn't that much time left."

"..."

"No, not that it matters or anything."

"... Yeah."

"That reminds me. How many people participate?"

"700 or 800..."

"I see."

"... Yeah."

The tempo of the conversation was off. The one who drove it down hill was Sorata.

- I've got nothing to say to Sorata who's going to leave anyway.

The possibility of her condemning Sorata with such line made him to be afraid unconsciously. Even when Mashiro finished eating, she sat on her seat. An awkward silence fell upon the two. Sorata just couldn't look at Mashiro's face. If their eyes met, Sorata might utter out strange sounds. He wanted to get away from the table immediately. But while thinking this, leaving first made him feel as if he was fleeing, so he stayed still.

- Do your best.

He can just return to his room if he says that line. However, he couldn't do it. Rather, he was able to say

any other lines apart from that line. It wasn't the time to comfort others. The one who had to do his best was Sorata. Mashiro had a clear goal, and she was running towards that goal. She was doing her best already. It was too pitiful to show his empty self now.

As he was falling deeper into his self reflection, there was a noise from the entrance. Turning around to see who it was, it was Jin who stood there holding back his yawns. As usual, there were lipstick kiss marks on his clothes. Jin saw Sorata and Mashiro together and asked an obvious question.

"What're you guys doing?"

"No, we're just,"

"What do you mean, 'we're just', it looks like you're about to sign off the divorce papers."

"Ah, really?"

"Hey, is it must be really bad if you aren't rebuking my joke."

At that moment Mashiro stood up.

"Thanks for the food."

She left the kitchen leaving only those words behind. She must have her manga to work on in her room upstairs. Silently watching Mashiro return to her room, and she was almost out of sight, Jin spoke to him.

"Hey Sorata."

"Yes?"

"If you don't have the heart for it, I'll take Mashiro for myself you know."

"... Ughh!"

He couldn't express himself in words, but his body responded by looking straight at Jin. No, he glared at him. Jin was enjoying Sorata's reaction with a smile on his face.

"You're trying to say 'What do you want me to do?' right?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"If you don't want to lose her, grab hold of her well."

"Shiina isn't really..."

"Then what?"

"What do you mean...?”

He thought he was able to answer, but he didn't have the confidence. If he says it, he would be unable to deny it. He's unable to run away. But did that mean that he knew where his heart was...

"~Huh? Jin, you're back. Welcome back~"

The one who saved Sorata was Misaki who still looked sleepy. Holding on to a long pencil for no reason told him that she was working on some kind of a manuscript.

"Yeah, I'm back."

"~I'm thirsty~"

Ignoring the atmosphere, Misaki walked towards the fridge, took out a 2 liter plastic bottle and started to drink from it. Looking over, Misaki offered the plastic bottle towards him.

"Does Kohai-kun want to drink as well?"

As Sorata reached out to grab the bottle, Jin intercepted it. Jin drank all of the remaining water and handed over the empty bottle to Misaki and left, saying good night. Misaki stared at the bottle mouth and froze in her seat.

"Wha, what should I do Kohai-kun..."

She whispered as if her heart was somewhere else.

"It.. was an indirect kiss... with J-Jin..."

It seemed like she didn't expect an answer from Sorata, as she got up and started to wobble to her room, bumping into the fridge, table, and the wall. Sorata who had just been left behind was exhausted and collapsed into his chair. The fridge with the duty roster on it was what he was facing. The first thing that caught his attention was the 'Mashiro Duty' label.

If he stayed close, he felt as if he would burst into flames by Mashiro's brilliance. But he didn't want to leave Sakurasou and leave everything in Jin's hands. I really

wanted to run away from this situation as soon as possible... If he kept thinking about it more and more, his emotion and his ethics would collide, causing disorder.

It was already passed 3 o'clock. The clock hands energetically moved on towards the morning at the same slow pace. Morning will arrive for anyone. However, for Sorata who was unable to escape from the night, it would arrive much, much later.

Part 2

"Oh, give it a rest, you."

It was a certain day in June when Chihiro called out Sorata after school to the teacher’s office.

"I'll just say one thing."

Chihiro had her legs and arms crossed and sat on the chair with the face that said that she wasn't in a good mood.

"What a coincidence. I wanted to give it a rest already."

The joke that was supposed to loosen up Chihiro's mood actually backfired and made her glare at him.

"It's not about that career choice survey is it?"

Once more, he threw the ball to judge the situation.

"I didn't call you out for such a small thing."

"No, but I think it is as important as an empty carton of eggs."

What Chihiro was actually worried about was the fact that Sakurasou's atmosphere was cloudy just like the weather in June. Even when the blue sky was visible, dark clouds soon covered the sky. The rainfall brought humidness and the heavy air that couldn't be avoided clung on to the skin for the past month, making it sticky. It was because of Sorata.

- I'll escape. It was what I wanted to do since the beginning.

It all started from that line. He recalled it numerous times , and every time, it made him feel upset. He knew that it would be easier to move if he stated the facts first. However, whether or not he's actually able to make that decision was a different matter. Jin on the other hand, started to come back to Sakurasou on a 4 day per week basis just to prove his words. Also, working hard over the past month to find new owners paid off, as he was told that there were 4 possible candidates.

It must be the difference in personalities, but every morning, instead of a greeting, Jin asked him if he made the decision yet.

"I'm still thinking about it."

When Sorata answered him like that, he patted his back and replied.

"Think hard about it, Kohai-kun."

Thanks to Jin, Sorata was able to stay away from the sea of gloominess and hold on. Misaki treated him the same way as before, and he often chatted with

Ryunosuke via mail. But three days ago, Ryunosuke gave him a notice of some sort.

- Kanda holds a poisonous weapon that circles around Sakurasou. I request a fast decision. There's no need to reply. Just show the results.

That was the sudden message that came through. He could've said hundreds of other things to Sorata, but when he replied in such puzzling way,

- If you continue to say such boring things, I'll drop you at Sagami Bay. From Maid-chan who suggests Sagami Bay as it is closer than Tokyo Bay.

Was the reply which wasn't very funny? But the real problem was his circumstance with Mashiro. Waking her up in the morning, making lunch, getting her baumkuchen when she says that she wanted to eat some was their unchanging daily life, but during their conversation, they weren't speaking at the same pace.

"It's morning, Shiina."

"... Morning."

"Yeah, morning."

"....."

"....."

There was an awkward silence that always crept in during their conversation.

"Today's weather is really nice."

"You're right."

"..."

"..."

He wondered if she wanted to say something, but was holding back. On the other hand, if she didn't feel anything at all, that itself placed Sorata in a confusing situation. The gap between them, which Sorata didn't really think about, grew larger over time and eventually covered Sakurasou like some heavy atmosphere. And so, after reaching her limit, Chihiro called Sorata out. It was

serious enough for Chihiro who usually didn't care about anything to step in. It was really unheard of.

"Kanda, are you listening?"

He responded to Chihiro, who sounded somewhat drunk.

"What are you so depressed about, that even I have to live in the atmosphere of a family just before a divorce?"

"Takatsu, whose wife went back to her family last month is glaring at you like as if you're his enemy, so please watch your words."

"The wife ran away because they got married."

"My, how blunt you are."

"You know, for me, I don't care about other people's troubles, but don't drag me into it."

"Is that something a teacher should say inside the teacher's office?!"

"There's no point being considerate to others, if I haven't gotten married yet."

"But, you told me that you wanted to before."

"Don't sweat the small stuff."

"Please pay more attention to little things as well!"

Every teacher and student in the room had their attention on Sorata and Chihiro. Everyone was pretending to do their own thing while listening and taking quick glances at them. Others were just looking on Sorata's trouble with indifference. Nobody chose to cut in .

"~Yay, he's being told off. Its the divine punishment for sleeping in my class.~"

No, there was just one person. Sitting in front of Chihiro. It was Shiroyama Koharu who taught Japanese, enjoying the scene. She wasn't even trying to hide it. She was enjoying herself to the fullest.

"You, be quiet. Students sleep in your class because they think you're a fool."

"That's so mean. Wasn't Chihiro on my side?"

She puffed up her cheeks like a child. He wondered if it good or bad thing that these two, thirty year old women were acting like this.

"Kanda."

"Why?"

"I'll give you an assignment."

"Eh, why?!"

"It's your punishment for making me upset."

"Wow, you're abusing your authority as a teacher."

"It's your choice if you want to leave Sakurasou, but clean after your mess. No matter which decision you make. I would hate to clean up the mess that you've made."

"Alright."

"If you can't, I'll give you the punishment of getting married to either me or Koharu."

"Wow, that's the worst punishment possible."

"Kanda, care to explain yourself?"

"Yes, Kanda. As you can see, I'm a fine woman, and although Koharu doesn't look like it, she will surely try her best in bed and definitely please you."

"What are you saying inside the teachers office?!"

"It's OK. Teachers are all adults, so they can tell that it's just a joke."

Then, why was the history teacher choking on his sweet potato yokan? It's also strange that the physics teacher was jumping around because he spilled his hot tea. Was it just Sorata's feeling that every male teacher waw looking at Koharu strangely.

"Hmm, Kanda, it's my preference for the guys to be cute. But I can let you barely pass. Nobody has any interest in me anyway."

"Sensei, please stop Shiroyama. She's completely out of it!"

"No, I can't be bothered."

He knew it.

"That aside, isn't she waiting for you?"

Looking outside the window, Mashiro stood near the door. She stood holding a red umbrella which didn't really suit her.

"Don't annoy me anymore."

Sorata heard her behind his back as he exited the office .

He went to his class room to fetch his bag, and as he walked out the school, he could hear Mashiro's footsteps behind him. Sorata continued to walk on the asphalt, which has been dyed black due to the rain, at his own pace. When the distance between them grew larger, Mashiro would jog behind Sorata to catch up. Even though he knew it, Sorata continued to walk wanting to leave Mashiro behind.

He could feel that Mashiro wanted to say something. But he decided not to look back. Soon enough, the guilt inside him grew with each step and he gave up even before reaching half way to Sakurasou. He stopped near

a playground, which only had a sandpit and some tires, where he used to play a lot at when he was a child. Mashiro's footsteps also stopped.

"You've got something to say to me right?"

If he tried to lure her to talk, she might tell him not to move out from Sakurasou, because since that day, Mashiro hasn't said anything about it. Sorata didn't say anything either. His hope of moving out of Sakurasou has been paused without any change. Since she didn't reply, Sorata turned his attention on the red umbrella.

"That umbrella, it doesn't suit you."

"It's because it's Misaki's"

"Where's yours?"

"Broken."

"Then buy a new one."

"I've been banned from shopping."

"I know."

Who knows what she might do if she went by herself.

"If Sorata comes..."

"When I feel like it."

"... OK."

"You've got something to say to me right?"

She was making Sorata wait on purpose. After thinking for a while, Mashiro said,

"I've wanted to say this for a while."

She looked into Sorata's eyes after mumbling that.

He prepared his heart for what was about to come next .

"I've thought of 'mangrove' as an perverted word until now."

"Sorry. Please give me some time. I want to find the realities and compromises."

Sorata crouched down on that spot and wrapped his arms around him. 30 seconds of intense thinking. and 1 minute of collecting his thoughts.

"Did you tell that joke for my sake?"

"..."

Mashiro doing that was almost impossible. So that means that she said it naturally, speaking her honest thoughts. So he waited. It was impossible for Sorata's brain to understand it.

"Is that something that's appropriate to say now?! It's not right? There's no way right?!"

"Then, when can I say it?"

"If possible, just keep in your heart and don't let it out!
"

He started to get used to it, but today's blow was quite strong. On the other hand, he was somewhat grateful that she didn't ask about what he didn't want to hear. As Sorata started to walk again, Mashiro stopped him.

"Wait."

"Why?"

Sorata only looked ahead and waited for Mashiro's words.

"Come with me on Sunday."

"..."

"There's somewhere I want to go to sketch backgrounds."

"Is that for your rookie awards?"

"Yes."

"I see... but sorry. I'm busy on Sunday."

He was actually quite free. He just didn't have the leisure to care about other people's matters. Also, if he followed her, they wouldn't be very productive. He didn't want to jump into a field of spikes by his will.

"Ask Jin instead."

He said it in a 'do what you want to do' matter. He wanted to say something better, but for now, everything was going the way that he didn't want it to be.

"Alright. I'll do that then."

Mashiro started to walk ahead. If possible, he didn't want to say anything, but seeing Mashiro didn't let him.

"Hey, Shiina."

"Why?"

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going back to Sakurasou."

"The dorm is in the opposite direction!"

"... I knew that."

"Don't lie! You were walking with certainty."

"No."

"You did!"

"I didn't."

"You really can't be helped. I'm about to faint."

"Sorata should have his eyes checked."

"You should get your head examined!"

That day, Sorata and Mashiro continued to talk as usual without the conversation being broken all the way to Sakurasou.

Part 3

Four days later, on Sunday, the weather was great. Sorata who was enjoying his nap, after waking up in the morning, was suddenly woken up after being hit by the door that was kicked off its frame by an external force.

"What on earth are you doing!"

He crawled up and rubbed his forehead that had been hit and let his frustration out onto the cute faced alien.

"~Not good! Not good! Not good I say!~"

Sorata knew that for Misaki to drag other people into this 'not good' situation meant only one thing. Ever since

moving into Sakurasou, there has only been 3 times where a similar event took place.

"Now! Hurry up and get changed Kohai-kun! The battle has already begun!"

Misaki was already all good to go. She was wearing a long sleeved top with a skirt.

"Did Jin-senpai get a new girlfriend?"

"It's a date! A date, I tell you! Sneaking mission start!"

"You mean stalking."

Sorata pushed back his yawns and started to fit the door back to its hinges. No matter how much he fixed it, the screws were completely of no use.

"I better call in a professional and try to fix it up properly."

While he was checking the damage on the door, Misaki was trying to take off Sorata's t-shirt and his pants .

"Stop! You're grabbing my boxers as well! Senpai, it'll fling out you know!"

"~I don't care!~"

"I care!"

Somehow, he shook her off and fled to the living room. Even in the middle of the day, Chihiro was having a drinking party by herself. On the table, there were already half a dozen of empty beer cans. It had just increased to seven cans.

"~Kohai must be worried as well right? Right? There's no way you're not! Get ready and let's go! Go! Go! Let's go. Together~!"

"Kamiigusa, only someone like me who as aged a fair bit, can say 'Go go go'. What you're saying sounds really ecchi."

"Hearing that from someone who drinks in the middle of the day isn't really convincing."

"Is there a law that says day drinking is forbidden?"

Her eyes were already out of focus. She must be in a bad mood because she wasn't getting any meetings these days.

"No, there isn't."

To get away from the drunken talk, Sorata went to the fridge and took out the milk.

"If Kohai won't come, I'll go by myself! I'll go!"

"You do that. It doesn't really bother me who Jin dates.
"

When Jin dated a nurse by the name of Noriko, Sorata went along with Misaki to stalk them, but hmm, it was quite tiring. It wasn't hard to follow them or stop Misaki from doing anything to them, but what was tiring was watching the depressed Misaki.

Each time Jin smiled at a girl and when the girl smiled at Jin, Misaki's smile started to disappear. When they grabbed their hands, put their arms around each other's waist, Misaki's usual energetic atmosphere disappeared without a trace.

"Wrong, wrong I tell you kohai-kun! If you keep acting like this, then you'll get dumped!"

"I'm not sure if I'm following you."

"Today's date is with Mashiro!"

Hearing the unexpected name, Sorata stopped what he was doing.

"Ah, right."

He drank some milk to calm himself down.

Calm down. Just calm down first.

He didn't really need to calm down if Mashiro was going just to draw the backgrounds. Yeah, it was just for some references. She said that she wanted to get some good references, so that must be it. Well, it doesn't really matter does it? When Sorata sighed in relief, Misaki gave some new information.

"They said that they're going to a love hotel! If he steals her, I'm not responsible!"

He spat out all of the milk in his mouth. Misaki who was standing in front of him was hit with the milk, square in the face.

"~Wow, how erotic. Spitting it out on her face.~"

He could hear Chihiro's criticism from somewhere far away.

"Lo, love hotel?! You mean a love hotel?!"

"What are you saying love hotel, I don't know something like that!"

"Neither do I!"

"Aren't you guys working up too much of a sweat? So what if they go to a hotel."

Chihiro reached out for a new can of beer.

"Of course there's a problem!"

"But I heard it was only to get some references?"

This person who calls herself a teacher didn't have any sense of danger.

"Do you really think that 'Maharaja' of a guy wouldn't do anything at the hotel?! You don't right?! It's impossible right?!"

"Well, you're right I guess."

"You see! It's almost as impossible as you finding a marriage partner!"

"What? Did you just say something really rude? Did you say it thinking that I was drunk? Didn't you? I heard it for sure."

For now, he ignored Chihiro. She wouldn't be able to remember it anyway, since she was that drunk.

"Wash your face Senpai! I apologize for putting you in such a perverted situation!"

"You get changed and meet up at the door Kohai!"

"I'll do it in 60 seconds!"

"Make that 30 seconds Kohai-kun!"

"Roger!"

As Sorata ran to his room and Misaki to the bathroom, Chihiro opened her 10th can.

"Ah, I better prepare some sekihan[35] for tonight. But they might come back tomorrow morning."

As soon as they went out, Sorata and Misaki caught a taxi and followed the GPS on Mashiro's phone to an old station that was being fixed up from years ago. After paying with a 10,000 yen note, Misaki didn't even ask for the change and ran into the giant shopping centre.

"Ah, your change!"

"Don't need it!"

As she ran away he yelled back in a manly way. Sorata quickly followed her. The change was only 1000 yen, but he felt that her attitude on the taxi was bad enough to tip the driver the change. Saying things like:

"Get here in 3 minutes! Its ok, if it's you, then you can do it! I believe you! Go, go, go, step on it! Where's the Nitro Methane! Show us your strength!"

Misaki who was already far ahead turned around at the entrance and looked towards Sorata. She was waving her hands at him.

"You're too slow, Kohai-kun! Unlock your limits! Unlock that limiter on your arm, you can do it!"

"Am I some kind of a robot? I'm already running as fast as I can!"

"I can transform when I reach level 3!"

"What?! Are you going to transform further now?!"

When he caught up, Misaki started running again, so he had to stop her.

"We mustn't be idle. They might be having a lovey dovey date as we speak!"

"The signals telling us that they're close, so we must be careful."

"~Alright, transform into sneaking mode!~"

Misaki attracted people's attention and hid in the shadow of a nearby plant.

"You actually stand out even more!"

"Kohai, which way?"

He checked the phone. On the map, it was showing that they were quite close. Mashiro's signal was coming from a shop in the southern direction. He motioned Misaki to come and went to where the signal was coming from. They went on the escalator and went upstairs and hid themselves.

"Are they there?"

Misaki poked out her head from Sorata's shoulder who was crouching. Her breath tickled his ears. He could still smell some milk from her.

"Senpai, you still smell like milk."

"It was Kohai-kun who was the one who spat onto it!"

"Please avoid the usage of the word 'spat'. The college girl who was walking by is looking at us strangely."

"Ah, found them!"

Because of exited Misaki pressing down on him, he felt some happiness on his back. He wanted to laugh, but when he saw Mashiro, all of his attention focused on her. Jin and Mashiro were walking together checking out the shops.

The tall handsome man and a slim beauty couple caught not only Sorata and Misaki's eyes, but many people's eyes as they walked by as well. Most of them took a second look at them as they continued walking.

The couple stopped at a fancy shop and Jin covered the display window and whispered something to Mashiro. They couldn't hear what he said because of the distance. Mashiro often moved her lips, but most of the time, it was Jin talking to her. It felt like she was just answering Jin's questions like she did with Sorata.

There must have been no item that caught their attention at the shop, so the pair went to different shops. If something caught their eyes, they would stop and talk a bit more. They continued to repeat it over and over again.

"Is this reference gathering? Huh? Is this just going around for references? Shouldn't they be at the love hotel looking for it?! This is a shopping centre! What are they doing!"

"... This looks like a date to me."

"It's because Kohai-kun is stupid! You idiot!"

"You aren't funny."

"You idiot!"

"Why did you have to repeat yourself?!"

He felt frustrated. No, he was boiling inside. He wanted to shove his arm down his throat and take out all the unpleasantness, but he knew that it wasn't something that could be held. It wasn't funny. What was it? It was Jin and Mashiro's shopping. When the distance between them grew shorter, he felt like screaming. He wanted to run away when their shoulders touched. But he couldn't.

"Kohai-kun, I've reached my limit!"

As Misaki tried to leap out, he grabbed her shoulder strap and pulled her back.

"If you do, you'll get caught!"

"It's OK! I'll just say that I felt like shopping!"

"That plan has too much holes in it!"

"But! But! I can't hold on any longer! I feel like exploding! It's about to leak! It's a flood!"

Getting her feelings out, Misaki head butted Sorata's chest a few times.

"Please stay still!"

"But!"

Misaki was in tears when she looked up at him. Sorata took Misaki by her hands and went to a nearby pillar. Jin and Mashiro were looking at an accessory store.

"「If you want, I can buy it for you.,Really? But I feel bad about it.,It's OK, I want to buy it for you to celebrate our first date.,Thank you, I'll treasure it.is what they're probably saying for sure!"

"It might be true for Jin-senpai, but for Shiina, it's impossible."

"「Well, to repay you, I'll cook something delicious next time.,Really? I can't wait.,Is there anything that you want to eat? Tell me, tell me.,I want to eat you.,Eh~, you're really perverted~.,What can I do? You do look delicious.,Stop it, saying such ecchi things, I'll get upset., Ah ha ha, sorry. I'm sorry. is what they're saying for sure, the two of them!"

"Stop saying such ridiculous things! Jin-senpai might say that to others, but Shiina isn't that type of a character! "

"Then what type is she? Why don't we hear it from the Mashiro specialist?"

Jin and Mashiro reached a shop with umbrellas displayed at the front. Mashiro probably found one that she liked, because she opened the sky blue coloured umbrella up.

"「Hm~, it suits you.,...,Should I buy it for you?,..., Don't buy it?,...,Ah, you're not going to buy it.sort of feel. "

"Kohai-kun's imagination is lacking! It's not interesting this way!"

"Were you expecting humour?"

"More than that, Mashiro doesn't even say anything!"

"Shiina really doesn't say anything at all! It's surprisingly realistic!"

Jin and Mashiro stopped at a utensil store where they sold fancy utensils. As Jin was looking around, Mashiro looked back at the umbrella from the previous store. Did she actually want to buy it? But when Jin talked to her, her interest shifted to some mug cups.

"Kanda-kun, what are you doing here?"

Sorata yelped at the sudden voice. It wasn't Misaki's voice. As he turned around slowly, he saw Nanami Aoyama looking at him strangely. Wearing a simple, cream coloured sweater with denim skirt and leggings, holding a large bag on her shoulders. It must've been because he only saw her in her school uniform, he almost didn't recognize her.

"Ah~, Nanamin! Hello!"

"Kamiigusa-senpai, I've told you before, but please don't call me that."

"Do you prefer Nanapun?"

Nanami scrunched up her face.

"Please just call me Aoyama."

"Why not Aoyan."

It sounded like some kid with a runny nose.

"Just call me Aoyama like normal!"

"Give it up; it's just better to stick with Nanamin."

When it came to nicknames, Sorata had a bad experience as well. From Soratan, Sorapun, and Soranin... there were more bishoujo character names that were suggested, and eventually they decided on the current Kohai-kun.

But they didn't have the time to play around. Sorata and Misaki had to follow Jin and Mashiro. Noticing Sorata's tired face, Nanami drew deep breaths.

"Just call me Nanamin then. But what are you guys doing here?"

"No, same to you."

"I'm off to my part time job. At that ice cream place over there."

"Ice cream?! Let's eat some ice cream Kohai-kun!"

Misaki showed instant reaction.

"Don't think like a wild animal! Use your brain more!"

Her shoulder strap that felt more like a lead for a dog.

“Dangerous, dangerous… I nearly ran away from the reality. Thank you, Kohai-kun!”

“It looks like Kanda and Senpai have a good relationship”

She was looking at a different direction as she said that . It seems like she has not seen Jin and Mashiro yet. Somehow, they might be able mumble it over. It was really bad to say that they were following someone’s date .

"Ah~, don't you go to the academy during the weekends?"

"Today's lessons already finished."

"So you're working on your way home?"

He thought that it must be hard, but didn't say it out loud. He knew why Nanami was working so hard. For Nanami to live by herself and for her to study to become a voice actor, he heard that her parents, especially her dad was against it. So they paid the high school tuition fees, but didn't pay for the boarding fee or the voice acting academy. She had to make up the gap by working part time every day.

For this reason, she lived a poor life, and towards the end of each month, she didn't have money to eat, so her stomach would make growling noises every now and then. He had treated her to lunch at the student cafeteria a few times, but she payed him back each time. One could say that she was really strict about money, but to Sorata, it felt like she had a lot to learn.

"So, you're following Shiina and Mitaka-senpai's date?"

Nanami said that in a somewhat annoyed tone.

“How did you know?!”

He realized the answer when he looked around. Misaki who was leaning against the pillar were looking at Jin and Mashiro.

“What a bad habit.”

Her eyes became slit like as she said that to him.

“I can’t really tell you the details, but there’s deep story to it. There’s no personal feeling, probably.”

“Do you have an excuse to tell me?”

Nanami walked away without looking back.

“Ah, wait!”

“I’m going to be late for work.”

“Ah, OK. Do your best.”

Nanami turned around when he said that.

"I don't need you to tell me, I'm going to do my best anyway."

Smiling gently, Nanami turned a corner and walked out of sight. Seeing her go, they resumed following the date. But when he moved to a different pillar, Misaki didn't follow him.

"Senpai?"

"Kohai-kun."

"Why?"

Misaki sat in the shadow of the pillar looking depressed.

"My chest hurts…"

It was different from usual.

He didn't want to see Misaki like this. Even Sorata started to feel depressed. Whenever they stalked Jin's date, it always ended up like this. He didn't know what to say in reply and since Misaki didn't want Sorata's concern in the first place, only silence came upon them. It felt like Sorata had a broken heart as well.

But this time, he didn't get infected from Misaki, but he felt the pain himself. He felt sick watching Mashiro with Jin.

"Is Senpai's illness contagious?"

"What?"

"How can I say this, it's also quite hard for me as well."

Truthfully, Jin and Mashiro who were moving further looked well together. Jin was skilled at wooing a women's heart. It was a cold reality. But this pain had nothing to do with the Mashiro Duty. It was because he was Kanda Sorata, and that his personality made his heart hurt.

He didn't want to think of a clear reason.

He wasn't stupid enough to look away from his heart though.

"Is someone who is pretty, somewhat adult-like, and calm Jin-senpai's type?"

Asami, who was in the acting club had a generous heart. The nurse Noriko, helped people to calm down.

The OL Rumi, had a mature women's charm. However, all of them were older than Jin.

"It's probably true. Fuuka, his first girlfriend was like that as well…"

"Did you stalk him from the beginning..."

"I knew without stalking him. Because she was my older sister."

"Eh?! Wait? Sister?!"

"They broke up when Jin graduated middle school. They went out for about half a year."

Sorata wasn't able to watch Misaki, who was watching her crush from afar, any longer.

"Fuuka is really pretty, I'm really proud of her."

He couldn't say anything. Misaki was cute as well. It was something half of every male across the world can accept. But there was no point for him to tell her that. Misaki could only hear Jin's voice. All she wants is Jin. That's why she longs for him, gets upset because she can' t have him, but still won't give up.

"There was probably something between them."

"What?"

"About Jin. When he entered high school he suddenly started to date many people. Until then, he only had his heart on Fuuka."

"I see."

"... Ha. Why can't it be me? How unfair."

Misaki was just about to faint. But they couldn't just stop following Jin and Mashiro. He asked before, and she replied that it was painful to watch them. It was even more painful to stay home doing nothing with a serious face. Sorata was still unable to understand her that well, but he accepted that Misaki could only live like this.

Jin and Mashiro went downstairs via the escalator. Misaki trailed them.

"Ah, wait for me!"

Sorata went to the shop where they were selling the umbrellas and took the one Mashiro was looking at to the counter.

"Kohai-kun! Jin and Mashiron are getting out!"

"It's OK if we lose them for a bit. We've got GPS."

Paying with a 5000 yen note, he got the umbrella. The worker who was focused on his job thought that it was a present and wrapped it up for him, causing him to exit the shop latter than he would have liked. Misaki who waited was upset.

"Ah~, really~. They just disappeared."

"We can catch up quickly!"

Taking out his phone, they were able to find Mashiro's location. They were able to see the roads, but the map it wasn't loading properly. The icon that indicated weak coverage flickered.

"Huh?"

"What's wrong?"

It showed that it wasn't able to locate it. He tried again , yet the same message showed up.

"Shiina's phone, the battery must be dead…"

"What~! I thought you can track them~!"

Misaki grabbed his collar and shook him violently.

"No, no! It's OK! They went downstairs, so they must have went out! The only love hotel near here is the one that looks like a castle near the highway!"

"It's there then! Hurry!"

From the shopping centre, they ran towards the highway and spotted Jin and Mashiro walking over to the other side on the overpass. They silently climbed up the stairs so that they wouldn't be seen. After confirming that Jin and Mashiro were on the other side, they hid themselves and looked down on them. There was a white castle shaped love hotel right in front of them.

"Will they really go in?"

Mashiro was emotionless as she looked at the castle. When she said something, Jin laughed, and whispered to Mashiro's ear.

"Senpai, we really need to stop them! They're actually going to go in!"

The weight of Misaki leaning on him suddenly disappeared.

"Senpai?"

Turning around to see her, she was standing up. She was about to be noticed by Jin and Mashiro.

"Senpai!"

"That's enough…"

It was small squeaky voice. It was hard to believe that it was actually Misaki's voice.

"I'm… going to go back now."

On his cheeks, a large raindrop fell. The sky was clear, but the rain didn't stop. The raindrops kept on falling. It was Misaki's rain.

"I'm going back."

Misaki, looking dejected, repeated herself and walked back the way that they'd came. Her pace picked up and she started with jogging, running and then sprinting. Sorata tried to follow, but he caught Mashiro's eyes.

"Ugh!"

Jin grabbed Mashiro, who was hesitating, and tried to bring her in by force. Thinking like a human ended there. Misaki just disappeared from his head. Sorata started to scream out like an animal and jumped down the stairs. Jin and Mashiro turned around. They said something, but he couldn't hear it.

With all that he's got, Sorata lashed out his fist Jin. His clenched fist became hotter. His neck became hotter. His whole body was on fire. The straight punch went towards Jin, but before he made contact with Jin's chin, Sorata's view shook. He couldn't understand what had just happened. It was obvious, because he wasn't expecting a counter from Jin. A counter to the chin from someone who was taller with a longer reach than Sorata shook his brain.

His body refused to work. He could only watch as he saw the ground came into his sights. The concrete moved

towards him. He didn't even realise that he was falling. The world started to bend. As he was trying to process what he was seeing, Sorata's consciousness went out.

Part 4

When he regained his consciousness, there was a mirror ball. It was reflecting pink and purple lights towards Sorata while spinning.

"Are you awake?"

Blocking the light, Mashiro's upside-down face popped up into his view. Her white skin was slightly dyed because of the lighting in the room. Still feeling cloudy, Sorata looked at Mashiro blankly. What happened? Why was this strange girl upside down? What brand was this comfortable pillow? He wanted to ask, so that he can buy it for himself. But it was time to come back to reality.

"Hey, Shiina."

"What?"

"Could this be a lap pillow?"

"Yes."

As they spoke, his mind became clear and his conscious came back to reality. Sorata quickly pulled himself up, and as he did, Sorata accidently head-butted Mashiro's forehead. Sorata couldn't even scream and he rolled on the floor in pain. Mashiro, on the other hand, didn't seem to be in pain and rubbed where they made contact.

"It hurts."

"Then say it in a way that says that!"

"It doesn't hurt."

"Then don't speak!"

He was unable to understand. This creature by the name of Shiina Mashiro was someone he was unable to comprehend. And wasn't she giving a lap pillow to a guy too easily?

"What are you thinking?!"

"About the earth."

"What! The scale is too large!"

"…"

"No, never mind."

Mashiro kept silent and just blinked at him.

"But, here…"

Where they were sitting on was the bed. A double sized bed. On top of that, it was shaped like a giant pink heart, taking up almost half of the room. It was a room specifically for the bed. The same could be said for the white walls. Because of the lighting, it gave off a somewhat erotic feel.

Decorated with antique items, it was like a room for a princess from fairy tales. However, instead of a prince on a white horse coming to a pure, humble princess, it was more like a princess looking after a boxer who tried to win the princess's hand in a boxing match inside the castle.

His eyes hurt and his head was spinning. The two of them, Sorata, with his eyes staring blankly, and Mashiro, sitting down on the bed with her legs folded, looked like some innocent kid who wandered into the wrong place.

"A love hotel."

Mashiro looked at Sorata blankly.

"I… was knocked out by Jin-senpai after that counter …"

And when he opened his eyes, they were at a love hotel.

Jin brought them inside for sure.

"That reminds me. Where's Jin-senpai?!"

"He went back."

"Why?!"

"He said that Sorata will do the rest."

"… Ok. Well then let's go back."

"No."

"Think for a bit! Do you even know what people do here?!"

"I'm going to sleep here."

At Mashiro's bold answer, Sorata shrank back.

"What! Why do you?, you resisted him…"

"…"

"In front of the hotel."

"Jin told me."

"Told you what?"

"If I did that, Sorata would come."

Sorata would come. What did that mean? He wasn't some superhero, who would come to someone's recue, that was ridiculous. However, it would be different if Jin noticed Sorata and Misaki following them.

"Did you notice?"

"What?"

Mashiro's eyes didn't show any signs of lying. So was it only Jin who noticed.

"Your phone, did you turn it off half way through?"

Mashiro nodded her head.

"Jin-senpai told you that as well?"

Mashiro nodded her head once more.

There was no doubt about it. Jin knew it. They were caught brilliantly. Jin knew what Sorata was doing and what he was going to do, so he tested him. He might have planned to leave Sorata and Mashiro together at the hotel from the start.

"I'll get him for this."

"Jin is a good guy."

"I know that. But the place! You should think more before you act!"

"…"

"There was no need to go on a date just to collect some references."

Sorata spoke more than he should have. He spoke what was inside his heart, but it was too late.

"It wasn't a date."

"You went shopping together."

Other people thought of that as a date.

"Jin asked me to."

"For what?"

"It's our secret."

At that sentence, his anger rose once more.

"Ah, Ok then!"

Mashiro suddenly stood up.

"Wh, what?"

She ignored Sorata and went to the bathroom.

"Wait!"

"Why?"

"I haven't finished talking!"

Not answering back, Mashiro took off her one piece.

"Why are you stripping!"

"To wash myself."

"I can see that! Understand the situation a bit more! What am I supposed to do!"

"Want to wash together?"

"Ok, I got it! I'll continue my lecture in the bathroom."

"…"

"…"

"Take off your clothes then."

"I'm begging you, please stop!"

"I don't understand Sorata well."

"I'm telling this to you clearly, the one who's strange is you. More than that, give it a rest!"

When he spoke harshly to her, Mashiro's movement stopped.

"Think about it! What if something bad happens!"

When the heavy silence that came, Sorata's frustration polluted the atmosphere. Mashiro looked indifferent and started to walk towards Sorata, with her one piece half off.

"There's no point."

Her voice sounded really cold.

"Why?"

"It's the same."

"Say it in a way that I can understand."

"…"

"…"

"Even if I thought about it, I would have gone to gather references anyway."

"You…"

His clenched mouth gave off an unpleasant sound.

"What about Sorata."

"What?"

"What happened? You said that you'll be busy."

"…"

At that instant, his rage and frustration melted away. Mashiro's point was spot on and Sorata's eyes were able to see the dejectedness in her eyes.

"The one who acted without a reason was Sorata."

"That's…"

He knew. There was a good reason. He realized it inside the shopping centre. He finally realized it. It was painful watching Mashiro together with Jin, and he didn't like it at all. It wasn't something that he developed over

night. It started a long time ago. Possibly on the day that they met, Sorata started to feel that way.

That was why he was worried.

He didn't want to put her in danger.

He didn't want her to get hurt.

He wanted to see her smile and always stay by her side.

Even if he felt this way, he couldn't say it.

"It doesn't matter."

He couldn't take his eyes off her.

"It doesn't matter for Sorata, who's going to leave Sakurasou."

She spoke out the words he didn't want to hear.

Sorata couldn't reply what he wanted to. He didn't have the right to say how he felt.

"I needed to do this to draw my manga."

There was no point giving cheap answers to a determined Mashiro. She wouldn't hear them. It wouldn't reach her. She was living by her own will, and like her true self. She was just expressing herself. For her, living was to create works. She was carrying that out. Her top priority was to create things. It was something that he learnt as he stayed by Mashiro's side. She was the type of person who would give up her own smile for her work.

She was here, because she felt that she needed to collect some references. He felt bad for telling her to think before she acted. Mashiro was thinking. She made this decision after thinking about it and so she didn't hesitate. She wasn't shaken. The one who had to think before acting was Sorata himself.

"Bye."

Sorata wasn't able to see what her expression was when Mashiro said that. For Sorata didn't have the courage to look into Mashiro's eyes.

When Mashiro came out of the bathroom, he went in and just stared at the floor as he was taking a shower. Nothing good happened today, but felt his sweat and the bad things that happened to him today being washed off.

When he returned to the run, Mashiro was sleeping on the heart shaped bed. She was defenceless with only a bath towel around her. Sorata wanted to tell her to wear something, but he couldn't. He just silently placed a blanket on top of her.

While Mashiro was in the shower, he thought about leaving. But he was worried about leaving her behind in a place like this, so he decided to stay and look back on himself.

He didn't want to sleep on the same bed as her, so he settled into a spot away from Mashiro. He sat in front of the door. Pressing a few buttons on his phone, he called Jin and he answered straight away.

"Hey, how're you feeling?"

"Terrible."

"Ha ha. Sorry I was going to take the hit, but the way that you ran at me like a monster. So I thought you might forgive me for hitting you, and swung without thinking about it."

"I don't care about that."

"What, you didn't call me because you were angry?"

"I'm not in the mood."

"Ahh, did you have a fight with Mashiro?"

Jin knew things very well. Sorata wished that he had the same ability as well.

"We didn't fight. I just received a fatal blow."

"And Mashiro?"

"She's asleep."

"In your arms?"

"How can that be if we just had a fight? She's sleeping on the bed by herself."

"What about you?"

"I'm sandwiched between a wall and a shoe rack."

Jin started to laugh.

"What did you do?"

"I'd like to know as well."

"I feel sorry for Mashiro."

"… What about me?"

"I don't have any sympathy for you."

Sorata felt that for himself as well, but to hear it from Jin was a different matter. He wanted to retort, but he didn't want to stray away from the topic so he let it pass.

"I'll be leaving Sakurasou."

"Did you call me just to say that?"

"Am I not allowed to?"

"No, it doesn't really matter. If you think that it's your path, then it's up to you."

"I do think that."

"Well, for me, I can't bear to look at a cute girl upset."

"Who's going to be upset because of me?"

"And if no one recognises my efforts, it has no merits."

"Yes."

"Firstly, I was continuously told off."

"By who?"

"Mashiro."

"Why?"

"To not bother you anymore."

"What?"

"She didn't say that exactly, but after leaving the hotel, I've thought about it and I came to that conclusion."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Unlike you, I'm not a Mashiro specialist. So it was hard to communicate with her today."

"Considering that, you guys seemed to have a nice date."

"A date, huh?"

It was an empty response. The conversation broke as Jin thought to himself.

“Did Mashiro say anything about today?”

“She said that it’s a secret between you two.”

Without meaning to, when he said it out loud, it sounded like a complaint.

“I told her to say that. To keep it a secret.”

“What was the point in that?”

“Don’t say it like that. All we really did was just go shopping, by my request.”

“What do you want from me then?”

“Don’t pout. I really didn’t want to say it, but tomorrow is Misaki’s birthday. I asked for her help to choose a suitable present. Now do you get it?”

“…”

“I told her that, she can say it if you asked, but she was being considerate of me.”

"So what?"

There was no point in hearing that. He'd already decided to move out of Sakurasou.

"Also, there was something that caught her eye at the umbrella shop."

The umbrella that he was talking about was wrapped up next to the door.

"The shop assistant and I recommended it, but she said that she won't buy it today. What do you think her reason was?"

"How should I know?"

"「I'll buy it with Sorata is what she said. You guys made a promise?"

When he heard that, his chest started to hurt. He did say that for sure, but he didn't consider it to be a promise . He only said it, because he couldn't be bothered dealing with Mashiro. But Mashiro thought of it to as an important promise.

He couldn't understand why Mashiro would think of it like that, but it tore at Sorata's heart and ripped it apart .

"If you don't want someone else to take her away, do your job as the master and look after her well."

"What do you mean a master… I mean Shiina is like a fascinating animal, but…"

"You'll regret it, if you don't take a good hold of it."

"Are you saying that I should put a chain or a leash on her to tie her down?"

"That's a good idea. It's arousing."

Sorata who just imagined Mashiro in a leash quickly pushed the image away.

"Don't think of it in the wrong way!"

"But why don't you try it? They should at least have things like leashes for you to rent over there."

"I'm not doing it!"

"Is it better to do it normally for you first experience?"

"Stop talking about that!"

"My, what a pure guy."

When he dropped the subject, Sorata looked at the bed where Mashiro was sleeping.

"I'm hanging up now."

"Ah, wait."

"Is there something else you wanted to ask?"

"Senpai, where are you?"

"Me? I'm at Rumi's house."

"Can we talk a bit more?"

"Yeah sure, she's having a shower right now anyway."

Sorata was able to hear the faint sound of the shower running in the background.

"It's pretty clear."

"So, what do you want?"

"Go back to Sakurasou tonight."

"…"

Even without saying it, Jin should know what it meant . He knew that they were followed and who Sorata was with.

"You should know it better than I…"

"Kay, STOP,[36]"

"Jin-senpai!"

"You're not allowed to say the thing I tried my best not to talk about as well."

"I can't look at Misaki-senpai like that."

"Ah~~And you actually said it."

Jin's answer was quite lighthearted. He probably saw this day coming anyway.

"For me, it's too much."

"Why can't it be Misaki-senpai?"

"…"

"Jin-sempai?"

"Do normal people ask like that?"

"Because I don't have a choice."

"Why bother asking if you know."

"If you bought her a birthday present, it means that it's like that, right?"

Giving Jin the time to answer, he waited. Jin started to answer.

"… I can't right now. If I see her depressed look, I might eat her up."

"What! You beast!"

"Inside me is a beast that wants to hurt Misaki. Using all of my lust, I want to corrupt her. I want to break her… Even for a moment, I want to have a sense of superiority. "

His voice was quiet and shaky.

“But to me, she is a precious person. I cannot dare to even put my finger on her. She is very very precious to me… I just can’t do anything about it.”

He was showing an unusual side to him. Even when he doesn’t bother to come back, he was always thinking about Misaki. When he saw Misaki and Sorata together, he also got upset a few times.

“I realised it myself when I heard it from my first girlfriend.”

“… You mean Misaki’s sister?”

“No way right, did Misaki tell you that too? I'm starting to feel a little unhappy.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It was right for me to punch you.”

“I won’t forget it for eternity.”

“Let’s just say that it never happened.”

"No, I need to hear the reason why you broke up."

"Just flush that down in the toilet."

Jin made a bitter smile. He didn't resist. But most likely he wasn't going to stop talking here.

"I can still remember what Fuuka said to me. No, I can 't forget it. 「I'm just a substitute for Misaki. You choose me because you're afraid to hurt Misaki, and want her to stay pure by your side right?"

"How humiliating."

"I never thought of it that way until I heard it. But for some reason, I couldn't give any excuses. In the end she said 「At least make an excuse and swung her fist at me. "

"Ha ha."

"It's nothing to laugh about. I got a bloody nose as well then."

Imagining Jin with a bloody nose on the floor made Sorata laugh even more.

"I really can't understand Jin-senpai's romance."

If you like someone, isn't it normal for you to have a caring emotion and embrace that loved one? Breaking or dirtying that person is a total opposite.

"Anyways, come back to Sakurasou tonight."

"I~ am~ telling~ you, if I go back, I will jump on Misaki."

"Then just jump on her."

"Sorata, didn't you just hear me?"

"Yeah, that senpai loves Misaki-senpai."

"Idiot! You actually dare say it!"

"It's my revenge for punching me."

"It's impossible for me…"

"Why?"

"Because I realized why I want to hurt her."

"That's…"

"Ah, sorry. Rumi came out, so I'm hanging up."

"Wait, senpai! Come back to Sakurasou!"

Jin didn't answer. He could only trust in him. For now, there was Chihiro still at Sakurasou, so he didn't worry about it too much, but he was still worried. It was his first time watching Misaki cry.

If it was like any other day, she would just bite on her lips and resist it. It wasn't like today was special. Today, everything that she held onto exploded. So it wasn't very simple to understand.

He closed his phone and put it on top of the shoe rack. He put his legs together and closed his eyes. The night was quiet and the silence made him feel lonely. He started to think about what Jin had said, as well as Mashiro, the umbrella and the date. He could hear Mashiro breathing, so he tried to use that as a lullaby. He decided to apologize to Mashiro about today when he wakes up tomorrow. So that he can move out of Sakurasou with no harsh feelings if Mashiro forgives him .

Part 5

He was feeling terrible when he woke up. Sleeping crouched down was not suit suitable for a satisfying rest. His body was hurting all over, and he couldn't move his body, let alone get up. He massaged his sore hands and feet and crawled out from the space between the wall and the shoe rack.

When the office gave the morning call, he hurried to check out of the love hotel, dragging Mashiro behind him .

When they were outside, it was raining. The temperature was quite low considering that it was only June, so it was quite cold.

Mashiro looked up at the grey sky.

Sorata was very tired.

The two of them didn't even say anything to each other when they woke up. They missed the opportunity to say good morning, so whatever they did felt awkward and unnatural. Even when checking out of the room Sorata pointed towards the door with his chin.

Even in the elevator, the hallway, returning the key to the un-attended office, they didn't speak at all. Mashiro didn't even try to talk to or look at Sorata. That attitude of 「I'm not going to give up anytime soon took away Sorata's intention of apologizing first.

'If you're going to play like that, it's what I wanted. I'm moving out of Sakurasou anyway. I will no longer get involved with Mashiro Shiina.'

Mashiro must've thought that the rain wasn't going to stop anytime soon, because she started to run through the rain. Watching her small and weak figure running, Sorata called out to her without thinking.

"Shiina"

"…"

Mashiro half-turned to look, but she was looking at the floor, not Sorata.

In order for him to get into her sights, Sorata took out the long and thin package. The umbrella that he bought from the shopping centre was inside.

"Use this."

Forcing it into her hands, Sorata started to walk up the overpass stairs by himself. He enjoyed the cold rain. It was washing away all the unpleasantness. He was punishing himself by getting drenched in the rain. There was no one to forgive him, but he was able to feel forgiven in the rain.

He slowly walked across the overpass. Looking up at the rainy sky. But suddenly, a blue sky appeared in his sights.

It was Mashiro who caught up to him with the umbrella that he bought for her. The sky blue umbrella. The sky blue umbrella with pictures of sky sketched inside. It was too bright when Mashiro was holding it, but it was a lot better than the red umbrella she borrowed from Misaki.

“How did you get this?”

“I saw someone who looked at it with a wanting expression, so I bought it as a present.”

“I see. Well, then I’ll return it to you.”

“No, I’m giving it to you.”

"What about the present that you were going to give?"

"Aren't you misunderstanding something?"

"I'm not."

"I meant you when I said someone."

Starting to feel embarrassed, Sorata started to walk away.

Mashiro skipped to his side, and covered him with the umbrella. It was really uncomfortable to walk.

"Thanks."

"… It's fine, don't mind it."

"Yeah."

Mashiro nodded her head.

"Sorata…"

"Yeah?"

Mashiro looked up at him. That day, their eyes met for the first time. As she opened her mouth to say something , someone behind them called out to them.

"You, over there."

The ones that called out to them was a policeman wearing a raincoat. He didn't have an umbrella, so he was wearing a plastic covered cap.

"You guys look like high school students."

The doubting eyes. It was best to assume that he saw them coming out from the love hotel.

"Yes."

"No, we're college students."

Sorata's answer and Mashiro's answer overlapped. The policeman looked at them in a suspecting way and noticing that they were lying, he stepped towards Sorata.

"Oi, this is a situation where you lie."

He whispered to Mashiro's ear.

"Why?"

There was no point talking to Mashiro secretively.

Sorata felt all of his energy escaping his body.

"Even if you are a couple, it's not good for you to be skipping on lessons and doing indecent things."

"We're not a couple."

"Ah! Shiina, you just stay quiet."

"What kind of a relation do you have with each other?"

As Sorata tried to think of a good excuse, Mashiro spoke out once more.

"Sorata is my owner."

A sudden blizzard came upon them.

The policeman looked at Sorata in a strange way.

"It, it's a misunderstanding! Shiina, what are you saying?!"

"Putting a leash on me."

"How did you?! Were you awake when I was on the phone with senpai?"

Then she must have heard him saying that he was leaving Sakurasou. If so, it made Sorata even more uncomfortable.

"…"

Mashiro didn't say anything.

"You said that you'll tie me up in chains."

He didn't have to courage to look at the coughing policeman.

"No no, wait! Don't just say the critical bit by itself! Why do you do this to me? Do you have a grudge against me? Is it because of what happened yesterday? I'm sorry! I won't be arrogant and try to lecture you! Please resolve this police man's misunderstanding! If this continues, it'll be recorded on my records!"

"I'll hear you excuses at the station, so why don't you follow me, master."

"Officer! How can you say that to a good citizen?! I'm a master? If I prove myself to be innocent, I'm going to sue you for defamation. The next time we meet will be at the court!"

"Don't talk back and come along!"

He was dragged down the stairs from the overpass by the policeman.

"Shiina!"

"We need to hear your side of the story, so will you come along?"

"Ok."

"Solve the misunderstanding first!"

Explaining their situation from the start to the end at the police station took nearly two hours, and when it was resolved, Sorata was out of energy.

It was difficult to explain their situation in simple terms, so when they explained how Mashiro was an aspiring mangaka who was collecting references for her manga, they finally let them go.

When they had finished explaining themselves, Chihiro came to pick them up. They bowed their heads to apologize for the misunderstanding, but were too afraid to say anything else.

Anyways, they were able to avoid being charged. It didn't leave any criminal records either.

By the time they exited the police station, the rain had already stopped and the sun was visible between the clouds.

"I really didn't think that sekihan would be for you."

"Really now! Don't you have anything else to say?"

"Of course I do, but I'm stopping myself you know?"

Suppressing her stressed face, Chihiro walked towards him.

"I-I know."

Sorata walked backwards by three steps.

"I don't care what you do, but clean up the mess properly like Mitaka."

"It's OK, as long as you don't get caught in an antagonistic logic."

"What? Do you want to be a good person?"

"That's my plan."

"If you don't get your act together, you're going to have a bad time."

Looking at Mashiro who was behind her, Chihiro turned around and spoke.

"Ah~ah, I can't be bothered going back to school."

Chihiro walked towards the station. Watching her go, Sorata turned around and said to Mashiro.

"Hey, Shiina."

"…"

She heard him but didn't reply.

"I'm sorry about yesterday. It was wrong of me to say what I've said."

"…"

"I know that you done what you've done after thinking deeply about it."

"…"

"But even for gathering references, the place wasn't very suitable."

"…"

"I will move away from Sakurasou, but I will listen to you. Tell me everything. And tell me exactly where you want to go and what you want to do."

If he knew where she wanted to go, Sorata wouldn't have let Jin take her.

"I'm free anyway."

It was quite embarrassing for him to say it, but Mashiro still wasn't replying.

Nothing could've been done, so he tried to follow Chihiro, but Mashiro grabbed his jumper from behind.

"Shiina?"

He tried to look back but he couldn't.

"Don't go."

It was quiet, but he heard it clearly.

"But I…"

If he didn't say anything now, his heart would break down.

"I…"

His brain wouldn't work. He couldn't say what he wanted to say. He just had to say that he was moving out once more, but he couldn't.

He tried breathing deeply to collect his thoughts.

I'll turn around and say it clearly.

As he decided to do so, Mashiro leaned on him with her forehead touching his back. When she did, Sorata's back became stiff and wasn't able to move at all.

The contact warmed up his back slightly.

He could feel her breath on his back. Mashiro was just behind him. Without saying a word they just stood like that for a while. But he could feel Mashiro's worries behind his back, and he couldn't just let it be. He had to do something about it.

"… Moving is."

"Yeah?"

"Moving is hard."

"… It is."

"It's bothersome to change addresses as well."

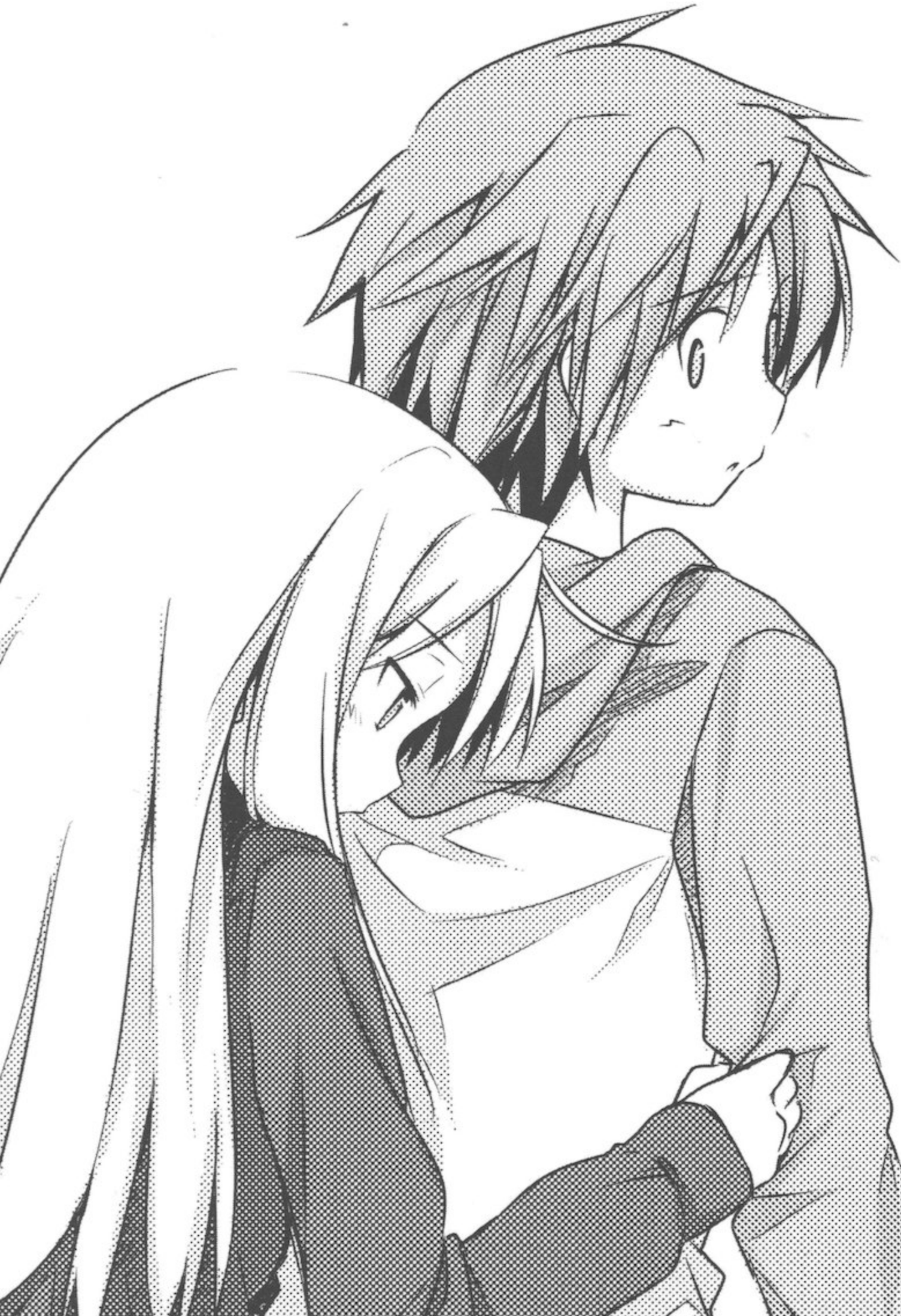
"Yeah."

"A normal dorm is a two people per room system, there's also the curfew so it's quite troublesome."

"Right."

"And Sakurasou isn't that bad."

"I like it."



Feeling like she was actually saying that to him, Sorata's heart beat faster. Mashiro could probably feel it as well.

“I think I like it as well.”

But he thought that being honest doesn’t solve anything. Hearing other people saying that this was a hideout for the problematic people made him fool himself like as if it was. He kept telling himself that it was important not to stick out from the crowd.

At the start, he did think that Sakurasou was a problematic place. It was filled with strange people and even the teacher was beyond what was considered normal.

But that was enjoyable.

Sakurasou was a lot more enjoyable than a normal student dorm.

Each day felt like a school trip.

Most of his classmates wouldn't be able to understand, and most teachers avoided it, Sorata knew it from the start.

It was undeniably true. It was the reality. The truth.

"Hello~?"

Chihiro who was far ahead stopped and pulled a face at them.

"Did you forget that I was here? What are you trying to do here? Think about the people around you, it creeps me out way too much!"

"We-we're not doing anything bad!"

What made Sorata say what he said was because of Mashiro who was still attached to his back.

"What is up with this 「I think I like it as well? It's really too cheesy!"

"Waahhhhh! Don't repeat that dangerous sentence!"

"It's really unpleasant. I'm frustrated, because I can only see you in my eyes."

"Don't throw salt at my wounds! You're supposed to be a teacher!"

"I have a lioness-type of teaching style!"

"Even so, you're too much!"

"If you have so many complaints, then OK! Tonight we'll have a Sakurasou meeting!"

"Eh? What about what?"

"I'm going to put out a rule for no romance inside the dorm!"

Under the blue sky in June, Chihiro's suggestion echoed out. Chihiro started to walk again at a faster pace. It was to tell them to hurry up.

Ignoring her, Sorata suited Mashiro's slow pace. He looked beside him. Mashiro also looked at Sorata.

"What?"

"No, nothing."

He actually wanted to ask why. He decided not to, because he didn't want to hear an answer like 'it would be problematic if someone who gives me baumkuchen disappears'.

He was happy with how things were for now.

14th of June.

On the record of Sakurasou's meeting, the following had been written.

- Banning all romance in the dorm had 1 in favour, and 5 against. We spent time today for no reason as usual.

Secretary: Ryuunosuke Akasaka

Chapter 4 - Being Serious isn't a Bad Thing

Part 1

On the night of the event at the police station, Sorata ripped up the paper which had「My goal: Escape from Sakurasou! written on it, and declared in front of everyone that he would stay at Sakurasou.

"I am deeply sorry for disrupting the atmosphere. Thanks to your help, I came back to my senses. I will continue to live here at Sakurasou, so please look after me from now on."

Jin smiled knowingly to Sorata, who had his head bowed, and Chihiro drank beer, while telling him not to say such embarrassing things. Misaki changed the subject like she didn't have anything to do with it and when it came to Ryuunosuke, who was obviously in his room,

- Yes, good work. From Maid-chan

Ordering the electronic maid to do his job and wasn't even participating in this meeting himself.

The reason why he decided to stay at Sakurasou was because of Mashiro, but she wasn't participating either, working on her manga as soon as she came back home. So Sorata didn't know what she was thinking.

It must've been because of the deadline drawing near, because Mashiro's concentration rose higher than before, and if he tried to talk to her, he was ignored.

Even when telling her that the bathroom was empty,

"He~y, Shiina. Take a bath."

"…"

"A bath."

"…"

"It seems like I can say whatever I want to. If you don't answer me, I'll grope your breasts."

"…"

"I'm sorry, that was just a joke."

Just like that, Mashiro showed no reaction. Sorata didn ’t actually have the guts to grope her breasts, so he gave up and returned to his room, reflecting back on his air-like presence. Did Sorata’s [37] ‘Sora’ [38] really mean air[39]…

Then it was something to complain about to his parents.

The next day, Sorata regretted his decision that he made yesterday. When he opened the door, Mashiro was still at her desk working on her tablet. The sunrise had shone upon Mashiro’s slender figure in a holy way.

Since she didn’t reply when he tried to talk to her, he dragged her out of her seat and somehow brought her to school. Of course, in the state that she was in, she wasn’t able to pay attention in class. When Sorata visited her in the art room during his breaks, he saw her sleeping boldly on her table. From what he heard from the art students, Mashiro apparently didn’t wake up, no matter what the teachers said to her.

He thought that he would have to wait after school, but on the contrary, it was Mashiro who came to him

while Sorata was packing up. Her forehead still had a red mark from sleeping, and her hair was tangled up. Nevertheless, Mashiro tugged at Sorata's belt telling him to take her to the dorm right away.

Thanks to that, they caused a lot of misunderstandings among their classmates, and Sorata had to leave before getting a chance to explain himself.

As soon as they came back to Sakurasou, Mashiro turned on her work mode and locked herself up in her room to work on her manga. She didn't say "thank-you" or anything to Sorata as well.

It seemed like she was working on a page of Name[40] per day. She sent it to her editor via email and had small meetings on the phone.

As time passed, the rejected Name prints were scattered across the floor. To clean it up, Sorata had to peek into Mashiro's room periodically. Mashiro's names were almost good enough to be called manuscripts[41]. The characters were drawn in solid lines, and there were no visible rough patches.

The calendar on the wall had「Rookie Awards deadlinewritten on the 30th of June in red letters and at this stage, with only about half a month left till the end, she couldn't afford to have any rejected names. She had to be getting OKs for her names and start on her manuscript as soon as she can. However, even in this type of situation, Mashiro was didn't slack on her drawing practices.

Even though Sorata wasn't expecting a reply, he asked Mashiro a question.

"Shouldn't you cut back on your practice for now?"

"I need to practice now. It'll be the same in the future as well."

Mashiro answered quickly, still facing her drawings.

But no matter what he asked, he was still ignored by her.

Even though Mashiro's head was only filled with her manga, she sometimes came up to Sorata and said a few

things that didn't make sense. She ignored him when Sorata tried to talk to her first, yet she only spoke when she wanted to say something.

The first time it happened was when she came up to Sorata and Misaki who were playing a fighting game together and said,

"Sorata, I'm going to my room."

And she really went up to her room after she said that. He looked around during the fight round, but she was already gone. He didn't know what she was trying to say .

"Kohai-kun, what was that about~?"

"Who knows."

The next day, when he was about to sleep,

"Sorata, I'm going to take a shower."

She came to his room and told him on purpose, and the day after that,

"Sorata, toilet."

Hearing that made Sorata spit out the juice that he was drinking.

“What are you trying to get across here!”

“Sorata was the one who told me to say everything.”

“I didn’t mean it that way!”

He did say it on the day of the love hotel event. He did say it, but he didn’t mean it in a way where she reports everything from her daily life.

“What about brushing my teeth?”

“You don’t need to tell me!”

“What about getting changed?”

“Change into whatever you want!”

“… Sorata is difficult.”

“It got even worse today! This is even more bothersome than trying to explain offside[42] to my mum!”

"Offside?"

"Don't ask!"

Mashiro twisted her lips and complained.

"Shouldn't I tell you that I passed my names?"

"Tell me things like that!"

"I passed my names."

"Ye, yeah. Congratulation."

"Thank you."

It would be worrisome if she didn't tell him these types of important news, so he told Mashiro to tell him everything that has happened. Of course, when she said that her period started, he wanted to die, but other than that it was bearable.

"What about the offside?"

"I told you, you don't need to know!"

Nine days remained until the deadline. During that time, Mashiro had to draw 32 pages, so he decided to put off Mashiro's training until then. He didn't explain about offside either.

A week has passed since then, and it was the 29th of June. When he came out of the shower and went to his room, he saw Misaki, who was trespassing as usual in shorts and a t-shirt playing a game with her eyes glued to the TV. A single player RPG. The play hours were over 30, and she was in the final dungeon. It was Misaki's playing style to avoid all the weak minions, the NPCs and sub-quests, so her levels in RPGs were always extremely low. As he expected, she was walking into the final dungeon with an extremely weak team that couldn't even beat the minions inside.

She kept pressing the reset button to repeat the process over and over.

"It would be faster for you to level up first."

"I would rather give up than get stronger by harassing the weak!"

"Oh, really?"

But her level was lower than the ‘weak’…

“Anyways, there’s a game that I want to play, so move over a bit please.”

Misaki didn’t even look at Sorata and brilliantly avoided attacks from the minions and exited the dungeon.

“I see, just ignoring completely…”

It was an excellent technique for fleeing,

“I’m sure this wasn’t a game like that.”

“No, no, Kohai-kun! You just need to play the way that you want to play! It’s no fun playing by the way set by others! I will make my own style of play!”

“Even so, don’t start betting your life on this game.”

While shouting nonsensical things, Misaki arrived in front of the final boss’s room. If she avoided one last mob of minions, she would arrive to the last boss. With Misaki ’s max HP, she wouldn’t be able to survive a hit from the last boss anyway. It dealt close to 3000 damage per hit,

but Misaki didn't even have 2000 HP. There was a 20 level gap between them. The last boss also had a second form, where its attacks had poison or petrification mixed in which dealt devastating damage.

Misaki, who didn't know anything about this, broke through the mob and reached the save-point in front of the last boss. She sighed in relief and opened the save menu. At that moment the screen died and they became silent. Then, the machine's logo showed up.

"Huh? What happened!"

Sorata and Misaki checked the game console, and saw Kodama, the calico cat, giving a cat punch at the power button.

An unexpected, cat reset in this situation. And in this game, being infamous with its software design, it didn't have any saving option unless at a save-point. So Misaki had to go back to the entrance of the dungeon and start from the last save-point.

Misaki was shocked and laid flat on her back staring blankly.

"My two hours of effort just flew away. I can't do it no more~. I feel like my soul has broken into a thousand pieces. It's not a heart break, but a soul break. I don't want to do it anymore."

"I know how you feel."

Sorata often got the same cat reset. He picked up Kodama and smiled at it.

"Sigh~."

Misaki suddenly sighed.

"You know~, Kohai-kun."

"Are you going to say some weird things again?"

"Cursing a queen to become a dog is somewhat erotic."

"What are you saying now!"

“「Ha ha ha! I shall turn you into a dog!I shall not back down no matter what!How much longer will that continue? Now, turn into a dog~!Kyaaa… and just like that, the queen became a dog!”

“That curse sounds too Japanese.”

“「How does it feel to be a dog.Whine~.If you’re a dog , then act like one, answer with a woof!… woof, woof… woof…Paw!Woof.Sit.Woof.How cute, I shall take care of you forever. Mha ha ha ha…Whine~… like that! How is it, isn’t it really erotic? It’s beyond being able to see panties or going commando![43] This is it, the true ero! The name itself is the brilliant Eden!”

“You should get sued!”

Misaki sighed once more. Her excitement from before disappeared without a trace.

“I just can’t do it~. Even playing games and talking to Kohai-kun doesn’t make it go away.”

“What does?”

“My thirst won’t go away.”

"Are you some kind of an addict?"

Misaki covered her face with her arms. It was probably to come face to face with her emotions and not to cover her eyes from the light.

"My body is going crazy wanting for it."

Her voice was slightly sexy.

"I want to do it. I can't hold it in any longer, Kohai-kun!"

"Say that to Jin-senpai!"

"I did~."

"Eh, really?"

He thought that that was really problematic.

"I keep mailing him to finish the next script quickly. I'm even texting him!"

"What?"

What he heard and expected wasn't quite the same.

"Next time, I want it to be 30 minutes… hmm or maybe longer. Will I be able to make a movie~. Ah~, I wanna try it~!"

"… Were you talking about animation?"

"Whenever I see Mashiron, I can feel myself burning up~. Ah~, I wanna do it quickly~!"

Misaki was rolling on the floor.

Sorata felt differently. Whenever he saw Mashiro, he felt nervous. That was how he felt 90% of the time, and the remaining 10% was the same feeling that Misaki was having, wanting to actually do something.

"Senpai, if you're not going to play, pass me the controller."

From the laid down Misaki's chest, a silver accessory could be seen. It was a cute necklace with a bear mascot.

When she gave the controller to Sorata, she grabbed the accessory carefully and folded her hands on top of it. The corners of her mouth were slightly up, making a happy smile.

"That's pretty cute."

Making a surprised expression, Misaki smiled like a girl in love and nodded her head. He knew without hearing that it was a birthday present from Jin. She started wear that necklace and dance with joy from the day after the love hotel incident. She also didn't show any tears like she did on that day either. At least, Sorata wasn't able to see them.

Sorata switched his view to the TV, and started the game with the controller. From the system page, he went into the network and started to download an action puzzle game that was released a long time ago. After downloading, it started to install on to the hard disk and it took around 30 seconds.

He went back to the system screen and started the game.

The nostalgic logo came up and the screen transitioned into the title screen. Since the game came out almost 10 years ago, the graphics were tacky. But when he controlled it, there weren't any problems with it. It was only a game where you walked around and defeated the same enemies, it was quite addicting.

"Ah, this one, it's that right?"

Misaki got up and poked her face at the screen.

"If you say this and that, I won't be able to understand you."

"What was it? The one where a normal person plans out an idea and makes it into a game? Think~!"

"It's 「Let's make a game."

It was an audition held by the console makers to scout for people with creative abilities.

Whether it's a team or a solo idea, they were able to participate with an idea for a game in a report form or a presentation to the company and when you get accepted, you receive an incredible amount of support to produce the game from the developing fees to the labouring fees.

The sales and advertisements are done by the console maker, so they only had to develop the game without any other worries.

The expectation for the audition was extremely high, so even after 10 years since it started, there were only a

handful of games that were actually developed and sold. As expected from the high expectation and the quality of the game produced, they were a hit when they were released. One of them was the one Sorata just downloaded, an action puzzle game that was developed by a team of 4 people from the Suimei University of the Arts.

This game sold more than 1,000,000 copies, so it became the poster boy for 「Let's make a game and each of the team members received 10,000,000 yen[44].

Even now, there were a lot of hopefuls who dreamed of that success, which made the competition even harder. But over the last 10 years, other things have changed as well. Because of the better developed hardware and appearances of different gaming companies, all these hurdles made it difficult to produce a big hit.

So now, the games were available on disks and packaging for a short period of time, and then were available to download at a lower price on the net. What hasn't changed so far was that the competition was still all about creativity and ideas.

"Could it be that you're making a game, Kohai-kun?"

Misaki had an 'I want to know' face and covered the screen.

"Senpai, you're in the way."

"You know~, you know~! Are you making a game? Why didn't you tell me?! Why! Why, why, why~! When we're this close to each other! Don't I mean anything to you?!"

Holding both of her hands up in the air, Misaki was talking to him like as if he was her boyfriend who was cheating on her. She started to shake Sorata backwards and forwards.

"I'm telling you, I can't see the screen!"

"If you want to be free, come at me! Tell me!"

"Don't strangle me~!"

Misaki was about to throw him off the bed while wrestling him when a familiar voice interrupted them.

"Sorata."

Being half hugged by Misaki, Sorata looked toward the silhouette by the door and saw Mashiro standing there. She was still in her school uniform without getting changed back into her casuals.

Mashiro's eyes scanned across Sorata's room and looked up and down at Sorata and Misaki who were glued together.

"No. We're not doing or trying to do anything!"

"…"

"I, I'm not lying."

"…"

"Well, you probably won't think of it that way, so it doesn't matter…"

He was able to see the tiredness in Mashiro's eyes. But she had a happy expression on her face.

"Kohai-kun! Only the unworthy give up half way through! You need to take responsibility and see it through the end!"

"When you put it that way with the responsibility and see it through the end, it sounds completely different from the true meaning!"

He broke free from Misaki.

He knew that Mashiro didn't mind who Sorata was with, but it was bad for his health if she stared at him emotionlessly.

Misaki stared at him with her cheeks puffed up like a squirrel.

"Senpai, try to read the mood!"

"Kohai-kun, the mood is for people to enjoy!"

She retorted at him with a serious face.

He pushed away Misaki with a pillow. She tried to talk back, but he obviously ignored her.

"What did you want Shiina? Is there something wrong ?"

"I finished."

When she said 「I finished it could only mean one thing.

Sorata tried to think of what could say.

“Mashiron, well done~! Show me the manuscript, show me!”

But his opportunity to say something was snatched away by Misaki when she jumped at Mashiro.

“What should I do~, how exciting! I’m really hyped for it! So excited!”

It looked like she didn’t care about Sorata’s story already.

“Ah, good work.”

He reached his hand out towards Mashiro who had been knocked over by Misaki.

“Yeah.”

Mashiro dusted off her skirt that she wore. Misaki ran up the stairs thinking that she had the permission to read Mashiro’s manuscript.

"Are you going to show her the manuscript?"

"I can't."

"Are you not allowed to?"

"No."

"Then why?"

"It's embarrassing."

"You're lying!"

"I'm not."

"There's no way you would have human like emotions !"

"You're so unreasonable."

"The one who's unreasonable is you!"

"… Do you want to see it?"

"Ye, yeah."

"Then I'll show you."

Mashiro turned her head away. It felt like she was going to show something else.

"Follow me."

Sorata followed Mashiro's lead and came out of his room.

When Sorata entered Mashiro's room, he sat where he was told to sit, facing the big display. He sat on the cushion and felt the softness and the fluffiness. He felt uncomfortable sitting on the fluffy cushion, because it reminded him of Mashiro. It would be silly to run away now, because he was the one who asked to see her manuscript, and saying that he didn't want to sit on the chair would be rude towards Mashiro.

The computer turned on with sound of the hard disk spinning, and Sorata didn't even have the time to calm down.

Mashiro leaned toward the computer to control it with the tablet. But she kept her distance not to touch Sorata.

When he realised that she was doing this for him, he felt bad about himself.

While he was criticizing himself, Mashiro's manuscript loaded up on the display.

"Here."

When Mashiro stepped back, Sorata reached for the mouse.

"Hurry, hurry, Kohai-kun!"

Because of Misaki pressing down on him from behind, his hand stopped shaking. He scrolled down to read the pages one by one.

There was no denying it, the drawings were superb. It must be because of all the practice that she'd done, the backgrounds and the people's perspective were better and the expressions were a lot more eye catching.

He could feel a lot more emotion in it and the dialogs were shorter and easier to read. The quality of the illustrations drew the most attention.

But half way through, Sorata's hand stopped.

"Hey, Shiina."

"Why?"

"I feel like I've seen this somewhere before…"

"The guy looks like Kohai-kun and the girl looks like Mashiron."

"It's just your imagination."

As if it was just his imagination. It wasn't just the illustrations. The content was similar as well. It was about a girl who picked up and looked after a boy who excelled at painting but had no common sense.

Their roles were reversed, but this was just like Sorata and Mashiro in the nutshell.

Just like what Misaki had said, the characters looked like them and he wasn't happy about it. He felt uncomfortable with each page and when the scene of the girl who looked like Mashiro washing the guy who looked like him, it was too much. He wanted to shout out that it was all false.

"And where's the love hotel bit?"

He read through it once more, but couldn't spot it.

"It was taken out from the name."

"Why?!"

"That's what Ayano decided after discussing about it."

"What about that time when I was stripped naked and you sketched me?"

"Page 3."

"It's only for a little scene where he gets washed like a dog!"

"I'll change it to a cat next time."

"That's not my point!"

After thinking for a while, Mashiro reached out for a notepad on the table. She flipped through the pages and showed Sorata a memo.

"It's Ayano's suggestion."

"Wasn't there another one before?"

"In Shiina's case, strong dialogues."

"Yeah."

"Were hard to understand, so."

"Uh huh."

"Don't focus on the story too much, and strategize about the illustrations and Sorata."

"I see… wait, what?! Why did my name get mentioned ?!"

"I told Ayano about the dorm."

"So you couldn't think of anything else."

"Ayano said that it was funny."

"You mean you and not me?"

"Ayano said that I should use it as my theme."

That advice was spot on, because the characters certainly were likeable and the tempo of the manuscript

was fun and enjoyable. Comparing it to the previous story, the new one was much better. There was a world of difference between them.

Also, by focusing on the art more than the dialogues had a very positive effect.

When the male character appeared towards the end on a two page spread, which was rarely done in a shoujo manga, it was almost electrifying.

It wasn't enough to say that it was good on a whole, but it was possible to say that each page was of value. Mashiro was able to draw brilliant illustrations. Mainly because this was her previous field was expertise.

"Wow~, Mashiron, this is almost cheating~."

Misaki looked strangely happy when she said that.

When Sorata read to the end, he took his hand off the mouse.

"How was it?"

"It was interesting."

"Yeah. The concept is good, so it'll definitely win the prize!"

Sorata could already imagine that future. He didn't know what the expected quality for the rookies award was, but he didn't think that this work looked amateurish.

Sorata scrolled back up to take a look at one of the pages, but the computer started to make mechanical noises and became unstable. The scrolling started to slow and the display started to freeze up. The screen turned off.

The three of them didn't say anything.

Cold sweat started to break out from Sorata's back.

He reached out for the power switch and turned it on.

The memory check started and even when it finished, the screen showed no change.

"It might be broken~. Just now, that was the hard disk making those noises."

Misaki reached out to the keyboard and started to press some keys. A blue bios screen came up. It was in English, so he wasn't sure, but under the hard disk section it said that the hard disk couldn't be detected.

"Wha… what happened?"

Inside of his mouth started to dry up.

"The hard disk died from that crash."

Misaki half laughed.

"Shiina, did you send this to your editor?"

"Not yet."

His heart dropped.

"What about a back up?"

"What's that?"

"You don't even know what it is?!"

Mashiro didn't seem to understand.

"It means that the data has all been deleted."

Then Mashiro opened one of the draws and took out some paper and pens.

"Uh, Shiina?"

"I'll draw it again."

"But the deadline…"

"It's tomorrow."

"How can you make it in time!"

"But I haven't got a choice."

"No, wait. There has to be another way."

Mashiro worked hard on this, enough to see the tiredness on her face. They couldn't give up just because the data was gone. Also, as the last person who touched the computer, he felt guilty about it. It would be better if Mashiro blamed him, but she was trying to draw again. There was no way for her to meet the deadline.

"Senpai, isn't there anything that we can do?!"

"If it's Ryuunosuke, wouldn't he be able to do something?"

"That's it!"

Misaki ran out from the room and came back with a fully charged netbook. The chatting program was already running. Ryuunosuke was already logged on. He even spoke to them first before Sorata was able to ask. The three of them looked at the small screen.

-- No problem. If it's back up, I've already done it.

"What?"

Sorata and Misaki looked at each other. Misaki also had a puzzled face. That meant that Misaki didn't tell Ryuunosuke about it first. But then, how? Mashiro didn't know what was going on and tilted her head sidewards.

-- How did you know? Why is there a back up?

-- What a useless question. I hacked it of course.

-- Don't get cocky with me!

-- I hacked it lol.

-- That's even worse! How did you know about the situation anyway!

-- Again, such a useless question. I bugged the rooms.

-- I told you not to get cocky with me!

-- I bugged the rooms (he he)

"Is is joking around?!"

-- Don't worry. I'm always serious.

They were certainly having a conversation.

"That's even worse! Don't bug the rooms and be serious about it!"

-- No worries. I've only done it to see whether if bugging a room was actually possible, I don't care about the conversation itself.

"You're pretty bold for a criminal!"

-- I'm repenting myself.

"You're just saying that!"

Mashiro grabbed his shirt sleeve.

“Data.”

“Ah, that’s right. Akasaka, do you really have the data for the manuscript?”

-- I’m always looking after the Sakurasou network. So Kamiigusa’s animation data, Kanda’s treasured photos and videos are automatically saved onto the server whenever they are loaded. Don’t worry. Blind spots don’t exist for me.

“I wish you did have some.”

-- I’ll load up the manuscript data onto a USB. It’s in front of my room.

Ryuunosuke logged out.

“Ah! Wait! Tell us where you’ve bugged the room!”

Misaki bolted down the stairs.

She came back almost instantly with a USB in her hand.

"It was a good opportunity to grab Ryuunosuke, but the door was already closed."

They checked the contents of the USB on the netbook, and the manuscript data was really on there.

"I guess we should be thankful to Akasaka about this …. But…"

"But?"

"We're not sleeping until we find that bug."

That day, Mashiro used Misaki's computer to send her work to the editors, and they looked for the bugs in Sakurasou until past midnight. During that time, Mashiro pulled out first by sleeping on the stairs, and after a few minutes, Misaki lost interest and started to watch some videos on the net.

He couldn't let Mashiro just sleep on the stairs so he tried to wake her up and get her to sleep in her room, but she wouldn't wake up.

"Sorata…. Thank you."

He couldn’t wake her up because his heart was beating rapidly, so he gave away his first princess carry to Mashiro.

The moment was witnessed by Chihiro and she took a photo of it, causing Sorata to become extremely embarrassed.

“You’re going to become my slave for a while.”

“A teacher shouldn’t say the word slave so loosely!”

He begged her to delete the photo, but it was meaningless as one would expect.

Mashiro had a carefree face, not knowing what was going on while she slept, as she was laid on to her bed by Sorata. He had a good chance to observe Mashiro’s sleeping face, and when he was satisfied, he came out of the room.

He set out once more to find that bug.

But no matter how hard he looked, he wasn't able to find it, so he gave up and asked Ryuunosuke via the chat room. The bug was planted in one place only, and that was Sorata's mobile phone.

-- When did you do it?

-- Remember when you left your phone in the dorm when you went to school?

He certainly did. He used his phone as a watch, so he remembered it well, because it was really uncomfortable that day.

-- Don't forget that during the day, when no one is in the dorm, Sakurasou is under my control.

-- O~K, come out of your room now!

Ryuunosuke obviously didn't come out of his room.

Part 2

Having finished her manuscript, Mashiro was completely out of motivation for the first 3 days of July. From the time she woke up to go to school, to the time

she came back to Sakurasou, she was like a capybara[45] submerged in a hot spring, with her mind far away in a completely different world. So it was quite hard looking after her.

But on the 4th day, her motivation started to come back, and the day after, she was back to her usual self, Mashiro Shiina, who was always doing her best by drawing.

Her eagerness rubbed off onto Sorata who was the closest person to her.

So it was all Mashiro's fault. When Sorata turned on the computer just to read a game developer's blog, he found himself asking Ryuunosuke a question.

- How do I become a game creator?

When Sorata looked at what he had wrote on the screen, he started to get nervous. It was his first time expressing his thoughts in words.

He didn't really have a specific need to ask. It had just caught his interest because of what Jin had said to him before. That interest grew in Sorata and continuously looking at Mashiro made his interest grow significantly.

He wanted to test himself. That feeling continuously raged inside of him. He wanted to get rid of that feeling, so Sorata asked Ryuunosuke that question.

After a little wait, Ryuunosuke answered back.

- If you get employed at a game company as a developer or a planner, then you could call yourself that.

- No, I don't mean it as a title, but as a career. Isn't there anything I can do now?

Another wait. After waiting for around 30 seconds, Ryuunosuke answered back.

- To start with, you would need to learn a programming language. You should be well versed in C. [46] It also helps to know about hardware and the basics of software movement.

- How would I learn all that?

- You can start by reading up about them. I can lend you some of my books aimed at beginners.

- Thanks.

- You don’t need to thank me about it. I saw this question coming anyway.

- What do you mean.

- I know that the home page for 「Let’s make a game has been added to your favourites. Also, you’ve been checking the developer’s blog periodically. It was easy to understand your thoughts.

He wasn’t really surprised at Ryuunosuke anymore. He was the one who backed up other people’s computer without their permission. Adding pages to the favourites bar didn’t really matter to him.

- I see.

- I can ask someone that I know who runs a debugging company for you.

- No, tell me so that I can contact them myself.

- That might be better. If you actually want to develop something, there’s something called 「Creators Familyas well.

- I knew that already.

It was a system, where the console makers would release the game development tools and whoever wanted to create a game would be able to utilise it to their hearts content. Not only creating games, but they were also able to upload it on the site, so that other people were able to play and judge the game, while trading information and news.

Sorata had downloaded a few amateur games before from the site and found them to be varied, ranging from well made games to utter rubbish ones.

- If you don't know how to program, then there's no point.

- I know that, it won't happen overnight. I'll take a look at the programming books first.

- Ok, I've left it in front of my door.

- You're pretty well prepared.

- You might feel like giving up the first hour, but understanding will come at a later stage.

- Don’t say such things.

When Ryuunosuke judged that the conversation was over, he logged out.

He went to Ryuunosuke’s room to collect the books. He was expecting two or three books, but there were 10 times more than what he had imagined. On the top of the pile was a helpful note from Ryuunosuke telling him to read the books from the top.

He brought them back to his room and opened the first book on the top. He skipped the introductions page and started to read from chapter one, where all the technical things about programming were written.

“… Damn it, I haven’t got a clue.”

It was different from any subjects that he was learning at school. He knew that the book showed the steps that he needed to go through to display 「Hello World [47], but he felt like saying so what. He couldn’t imagine himself creating a game by learning things like that.

“I’ll do my best from tomorrow, I guess.”

He didn't even make it through the time period of 1 hour that Ryuunosuke predicted, and in gave up under 20 minutes. He returned the book to the top of the stack, and heard someone knocking on his door for the first time in months.

If it were Misaki, she would barge into the room, and so would Mashiro. Then it should be Jin or Chihiro at the door.

"Come in."

He shouted at the door.

The door opened slowly and standing there was Mashiro.

"Ah…"

Sorata stood up and froze without realising it himself.

Mashiro was there. Wearing a Yukata[48].

Now that he thought about it, he remembered what Misaki said yesterday. That's right; it was the Tanabata festival party. He remembered being told that the males

had to wear a Jinbei [49] and the females had to wear a yukata. They had to have a Sakurasou meeting just to make it official.

Misaki supplied the Jinbei and Yukata for everyone yesterday and also planted a giant bamboo tree which was almost 10 meters. It was planted next to the cherry tree and a tree which was planted the year before for Christmas. It stood among those trees and let off a strange sense of the seasons. It was clearly visible from Sorata's window.

Mashiro wore a monochromatic Yukata that accentuates her slim figure and held onto a small bag in her hand. She had her hair up, so her white neck which wasn't usually visible stood out. A nice fragrance could be smelt from her neck.

Without saying anything, Mashiro just looked at Sorata.

"Wha, what's wrong?"

Sorata desperately stopped himself trying to say that she looked really good, and he tried his best to keep a calm face.

“Just…”

“So, was there anything that you needed?”

“No.”

“Then what did you come here for?”

“…”

It could’ve been his imagination, but Mashiro looked upset. She fiddled with her fringe and continued to look at Sorata. For some reason, it was 180 degrees different than the usual Mashiro, but he thought that it was because of the Yukata.

When Sorata stopped talking, the both looked like they had something to say, but couldn't say it.

“Mashiron how was it?”

At that moment, wearing a red yukata and speaking with a clear voice, Misaki came. Misaki looked both at Sorata and Mashiro and made a face as if she understood what was going on.

“Huh, was I wrong?”

“Kohai-kun is the worst~~! Stupid~~!”

Misaki, who just insulted Sorata, took Mashiro by the hand and tried to take her out.

Even Mashiro joined in and said this on her way out.

“Stupid.”

The sound of their footsteps faded away.

Sorata, who had just been left behind, thought to himself that a woman could not be understood and turned off his computer. Feeling guilty about it, he poked his head outside to take a look at the hallway.

But as expected, Mashiro and Misaki were not in sight.

“What was that about?”

"'Something like it looks good on you, I can't hold back any longer, I want to take your clothes off, I want to do the tyrant play' is what she probably wanted to hear."

The owner of the voice who was leaning against the hallway wall was Jin. He was wearing a brown Jinbei that fitted his is tall figure.

"Just now, there were traces of sexual harassment mixed in, weren't there."

"When I'm the one who's talking, the girls seem to like it though."

"That's because Senpai is Senpai!"

"If you want to complain, then at least think of a reason."

Jin chuckled and walked towards the doorway.

"You should get changed and join us quickly."

"Ah, wait! What do you mean?"

Jin kept walking while waving his hand behind his back.

"What the heck's going on? And why is everyone participating anyway?"

Grumbling to himself, he took out the Jinbei that he received from Misaki the day before and before he even realized it, he started to get excited.

When he got changed and went out to the garden, he saw Misaki with dozens of kids from the neighbourhood hanging up their wishes on the bamboo tree [50]. They were enjoying themselves sometimes telling each other what they had written or trying to keep it a secret.

They had a similar event last year's Christmas as well. Misaki was always popular with the kids, so she was the centre of events.

It was surely because she had a similar mentality as the kids. If it was her, she would have wrote something like 「I want to be able to shoot beams as her wish. But on the back would be a desperate small writing that said I wish that he would look back someday. Sorata's heart started to hurt.

A young kindergarten kid reached out to Misaki's full breasts. A divine punishment would fall upon him if he was an adult, but Misaki just gently hit him on the head and everyone started laughing.

He watched the commotion from afar with ice like eyes.

"If that kid actually touches them, I will make him fly, not only over the Milky Way, but the River Styx as well."

"Senpai, you do realize that your opponent is just a kid ."

"Hey, do you think a perfect crime is possible?"

"Don't joke around with such a serious face."

"What are you saying? I'm not joking."

"That's even worse!"

"Ha ha, I'm only kidding."

His eyes, however, weren't laughing at all. Even now, his eyes were focused on Misaki and Misaki alone.

"Here, this one is yours."

Jin handed over a wishing paper and a pen to him.

"A wish…"

Looking over to Mashiro who was sitting down at a distance away from the kids, she was writing down a wish with a serious face.

Behind her, Chihiro was drunk as usual and was gulping down some more beer. She was having a small banquet with some of the mothers of the children. The 7 cats that Sorata had raised were next to them eating some of the food given.

Misaki was still with the kids under the bamboo tree. The present she got before was reflecting off the moonlight.

"Misaki-senpai liked it."

"Huh? Ah, that's good."

Looking up at the starry sky, Jin replied without looking at him.

Watching him made Sorata feel like asking him about that time.

What happened on that day. The day when he called Jin at the love hotel,

But before Sorata could speak, Jin opened his mouth.

“Sorry.”

Sorata didn't know why Jin was apologizing and looked towards him.

Jin was still looking up at the sky.

“It was me who put pressure on you, when you were still deciding if you should move out.” Finally seeing Jin’s face, his eyes had a bitter smile to it.

“That’s not something Senpai should apologize about.”

“That day… my judgment was twisted.”

“Did something happen?”

"I was critically injured by the animation company's producer. You know how it is. How my screenplay is criticized. The reputation on-line is so-so as well."

Sorata nodded his head in silence. He didn't say anything out loud.

There was a difference in people's opinions, but most of them weren't satisfied with Misaki's animation's screenplay. Because of the high quality visuals, the somewhat poorly written screenplay was noticed too much. On the reviews, there were comments such as 'The visuals and the screenplay are not of the same quality' and 'The screenwriter himself should be replaced'.

"According to them, I was like weights holding Misaki down. I've heard it from numerous people, but it was the first time hearing it in person. 「The story is average. The characters are also average. The dialogues aren't interesting. The production fees were there, but an amateur's work is noticed. Hearing all that damaged me a lot. That was why I tried to take it out on someone else to recover myself."

"That was when I came in right?"

“Yup. A sandbag-like person, who would be knocked out with a single punch.”

“That’s too much.”

“I’m reflecting on myself that bullying a depressed person wasn't adult like.”

“If you’re reflecting on yourself, then tell me the rest… Of what you were going to say.”

“What I was going to say… I guess ignoring it wouldn't be right.”

Jin laughed weakly.

For Jin, even a powerless position was quite a picture.

“Why can’t it be Misaki-Senpai?”

Loving her enough to be jealous of a kid, Jin treasured her so much, yet he wouldn't attempt to approach that route.

Before, he said that it was because he didn't want to hurt Misaki.

And when he found out the reason, he put a distance between them.

"A talent is something that draws people and impoverishes them. The closer you draw towards it, it mercilessly tears you apart."

"Are you talking about Misaki-Senpai?"

Jin agreed with his eyes.

"They live in a different world from us. A monster who is nothing like me. For a normal person like me, they are beyond the sky. I can't even see them beyond the clouds."

Jin kept looking up at the sky.

"Misaki lives in a world like that."

"…"

"So sometimes, I want to break her."

"That's…"

"What about you? Which side do you think you're on?"

Asking that question, Jin looked towards Mashiro who was hanging up her wishing paper.

Mashiro turned her head to see Sorata.

Sorata looked at her Yukata figure, and he answered Jin.

"The talents and skill won't matter to Misaki-Senpai."

"I think so too. But I can't think of any methods to shorten the gap between me and Misaki, apart from giving up, so I don't know how to accept her. Until I can stand proudly next to her, I can only act badly."

"So is that why you stayed away from her?"

"Do you want to say that it's futile? I know, I can't possibly love anyone apart from Misaki."

“Saying that you can’t change the way that you feel, yet still date many girls and do your best to try to hurt Misaki’s feelings is something that I just can’t understand .”

“If you know that much, then don’t talk.”

He remembered what Misaki wrote on the back of her wishing card.

“Misaki-Senpai’s feelings won’t change. It would be faster for you to be stabbed by someone.”

“Ha ha, that might be true.”

“Don’t hurt Misaki-Senpai anymore.”

“If you like Misaki so much, make her happy yourself. ”

“You’re joking right?”

Jin didn't answer back about it and changed the topic.

“Until I will be able to stand up to Misaki's talents… I can’t go near her.”

He wasn't able to ask if he would be able to be in that position one day.

He didn't want to hear a negative response.

Jin ended the conversation and started to walk away. As he did, as if they were switching shifts, Mashiro walked towards Sorata.

When Mashiro stood next him, his throat dried up.

“What did Sorata wish for?”

His wishing paper was still blank.

“What about you?”

“Not telling.”

Mashiro looked at the bamboo tree.

“Wish for the prize.”

“Don’t need to.”

“Oh, why not?”

"I can do it with my strength."

She wasn't showing off at all. Her clear eyes were full of confidence and her Yukata clad figure looked dependable.

"… You're really amazing."

"What is?"

"That confidence."

"Because Sorata said that it was good."

"If you don't win, don't blame it on me."

"Ayano said that it was good as well."

"Really?"

"It should come first or second. Depends on the final evaluation. It should get a special mention at least. So I believe her."

"When does the result come out?"

"The first round is on the 19th."

"Of this month?"

Mashiro nodded without a change in her expression.

That was less than 2 weeks away. For some reason Sorata started to get worried. They don't know how the result would be unless they announce it.

The total number of people who participate are 700 to 800. The prizes were the grand prize, gold prize, silver prize, and 2 special mentions. So in reality, the number of people who wins a prize is quite small.

It was a narrow door to pass through.

So Sorata decided to wish for Mashiro's debut and write it on the wishing paper. He decided to hang it as high as he can so that Mashiro won't be able to see it.

Mashiro stood next to Sorata and wordlessly looked at the bamboo stick, trying to spot her wish. Her thin lips that reflected some of the moonlight caught Sorata's attention. He wanted to look at them more. He wanted to reach out and touch them.

"What?"

"Nothing…"

He couldn't say that he was checking her out. To hide his increasing heart beat, Sorata tried to switch the topic.

"Shiina looks really good in a Yukata."

"…"

"…"

Both the speaker and the listener suddenly froze.

"Ther… there wasn't a special meaning to it really!"

"Yeah…"

Why did he say that? Why did he tell another truth to stop himself from telling the truth? He wanted to hide in a hole. But running away now would be even more embarrassing.

"It'll come true right?"

Her voice was too small for Sorata to hear it properly.

"What?"

"It's nothing."

As he was going to ask, Chihiro attacked his back. " Hey, you."

She put all of her weight on Sorata's back like a drunkard.

"Whoa, Sensei, you stink of booze!"

"You~, didn't forget about the career choice survey did you?"

"Get away from me!"

"So what if my boobs are touching you~ don't get too excited."

"Whoa, don't touch a student's butt! I'll sue you for sexual assault!"

Part 3

Although the weather station had announced that the rainy season had finished, the rain continued to fall and it wasn't until the latter half of July was the blue summer sky was visible.

During that period, the semester exams had finished and when the results were posted, they felt the disappointment and the happiness, but that was already of the past.

The 19th of July. Today was the national holiday Marine Day [51] so they didn't go to school. It was also the day before the summer break. So really, the summer break had already started. Everyone's heads were full of joy, planning out what they were going to do during the holidays.

Sorata would've been the same if it was last year.

However, this year was a bit different. He didn't have anything planned for that day, but he woke up early in the morning and was restless. This feeling wouldn't leave him even when he was having lunch and his afternoon snack, but it grew instead as time passed.

To have a change of mood, he started to prepare dinner, but when he came back to his senses, his hands had stopped working.

He knew why he was like this. It was because today was the day when the winners of the rookies' awards

were being announced. He heard that the first round was easy to pass, but when the day actually came, he couldn't sit still. He had nothing to do with it, but he just couldn't concentrate at all.

On the other hand, Mashiro was woken up by Sorata, under the desk as usual and after that, she continued to draw manga.

She didn't mention anything about the first round.

She just came out of her room, and was feeding the cats in the kitchen with Misaki. No, the only one who was feeding them was Misaki. For some reason, the cats didn't want to eat out of Mashiro's hand. All seven cats surrounded Misaki.

“Eat a lot and grow up to become great tigers.”

Mashiro didn't want to lose and tried to feed them, but Hikari, Nozomi and Kodama turned away quickly.

“Sorata, what did you do to them?”

“Why me!”

“Sorata's cats. They’re being mean to me.”

“Don’t blame that on me!”

“I want them to become tigers.”

“Cats won’t become tigers! They'll just become fat cats!”

Originally, all seven cats were used to people, so they were really friendly. Sorata was the one who wanted to ask why they only avoided Mashiro.

Mashiro continuously tried to feed the cats, but she didn't succeed.

When the disappointed Mashiro sat at the kitchen table, the phone started ringing. The ringtone was still set to the preset sound.

It was Mashiro's phone.

“Yes?”

With a machine-like movement, Mashiro picked up her phone.

Sorata unconsciously checked the time. It was 6:10 P.M.

Judging by the timing of the call, it was from the editors for sure. No, he had never seen Mashiro get a call from anyone else.

Sorata felt his body being squashed by an invisible force. He became thirsty and wanted to run away. He got a bad feeling about it. His view started to get cloudy.

Meanwhile, Mashiro didn't notice anything and kept replying yes a few times without actually saying anything else. Her expression didn't show any emotions. He couldn't read anything from her expression. Did that mean that she passed the first round?

“Thank you.”

With that, Mashiro hung up the phone.

Sorata, Misaki and the seven cats became silent and looked at Mashiro.

Mashiro’s hand that was gripping on to her phone started to sag.

“It didn't qualify.”

It felt like Mashiro's voice was coming from a far. It felt like she spoke in a foreign language. His brain was unable to process what she had just said.

Mashiro stood up from her chair.

“I’m going to my room.”

Leaving only those words behind, Mashiro started swaying as she walked towards her room.

“Ah, Mashiron!”

Misaki started to follow her and looked back at Sorata.

“Kohai-kun!”

Misaki’s voice felt distant as well. He heard the loud footstep noises coming towards him. Misaki pulled at his hand, but he couldn’t move.

His feelings started to rage inside him and immobilized him. He felt his body being wrapped around and be disconnected from the outside.

What is this? Why is this happening? Why did his heart feel like this?

It didn't qualify. Mashiro didn't pass.

He thought that it would be nice if she got through. He wanted her to win. But now he didn't know what to feel. How was his body reacting right now?

He felt his heart beating to the rhythm of time. But apart from that, he couldn't hear anything else.

He was laughing from the shadows. He was looking at himself while laughing. He was laughing his ass off watching his sorry face.

Sorata couldn't resist it for any longer and pushed Misaki aside and started running. His destination wasn't Mashiro's room. It was the doorway. He ran out of the dorm. He wanted to escape even 1 second earlier.

"Hey, Sorata?"

He crossed paths with Jin who was taking his shoes off . He couldn't say anything back.

He could only look down and run.

He didn't want to show it to anyone else. He didn't want them to know.

That he was relieved when Mashiro didn't qualify…

When Sorata came to his senses after fleeing from the dorm, he was sitting on a tire at the playground. He bowed his head down to the ground and pointlessly stared at the line of ants that were going back to their home.

He didn’t know how long he stayed there for.

The day had already ended and the dying streetlight flickered.

He cheered Mashiro on for sure. He wanted her to win the prize. He wished that her hard efforts would be rewarded.

That was what he believed.

But then, what was that feeling from before. He wondered why he was relieved when he heard that Mashiro’s didn't qualify.

He felt like he was crazy to be feeling glad about someone’s misfortune, and to make it worse, about

Mashiro's results. He felt like he was a terrible human being.

"I'm the worst…"

He put his head in his hands. He wanted to cry. He wanted to disappear. He wanted to kill himself.

"What's the worst?"

Surprised, he looked up and saw Jin on the tire next to his. Sorata quickly looked away. He didn't want Jin to see his pitiful self. He didn't want others to find out about his twisted self. If others were to find out, he wouldn't be able to return to Sakurasou.

"I want to be by myself."

"Don't try to act cool."

With light-hearted words, Jin sat on the tire. He knew that much without needing to look up.

"Misaki's new anime… You've seen it right?"

Sorata didn't reply back, and neither did Jin expect a response.

"The critics are raving about it. For a 5 minute anime, there had already been three different talks for a DVD version. It's frustrating."

"Leave me alone!"

"Within the first three days, there were over 1,000,000 views. Everyone was excited about Misaki's new work."

"I'm telling you, Senpai!!"

When he looked up, Jin was looking straight ahead, bitting on his lips.

"I… I thought that it would be a failure. That's what I wished for."

Jin's fists started to shake.

"I really wanted her to be broken this time."

"… Senpai."

Unlike his usual calm self, Jin's face was distorted in pain. Sorata now knew that Jin has been suppressing his feelings until now.

“I don’t understand people who are happy because of someone else’s success.”

Jin looked up and put on a forced smile as he said that.

“Sorry. It’s just that I know how you feel.”

“I…”

“Don’t worry about it. Mashiro or Misaki wouldn't be able to understand it anyway.”

“… I’m sorry.”

“About what?”

Jin laughed out loud. He started to pat Sorata’s head messily.

“Should we eat some ramen on our way back? My treat.”

“Is… Shiina OK?”

Jin didn't say anything back. He tried to walk away from the playground like that.

“It might be silly to worry about that now though.”

It is true that he wanted to see Mashiro's happy face if she won the reward. Because he thought that Mashiro would be able to laugh for herself. He wanted to see that.

“Well, it doesn't matter. Both of them are your true feelings. It’s not that simple… those types of things.”

He couldn't fully agree, but thanks to Jin, he felt a lot better.

Part 4

In the end, Mashiro didn’t come out of her room that night. She stayed silently locked up in her room. Even on the last day of the semester, Sorata went to her room to wake her up as usual but there was no response from the room.

Sorata didn’t have a choice but to leave Mashiro behind and came out from Sakurasou.

It was his first time going to school by himself ever since Mashiro came, so it felt like he’d left something important behind.

When the end of semester ceremony ended, Sorata got swept up by his classmates and went to a karaoke. However, he wasn't in the mood at all, so he got out by himself within the first 30 minutes. And while aimlessly wandering around, he took the long way back to Sakurasou.

When he arrived, it was slightly over 3 o'clock and the sun was still up high with the heat blasting at him.

As he was taking off his shoes while wiping away his sweat, Misaki, who was wearing a camisole and a mini skirt, ran to him.

"Hey, hey, Mashiron hasn't come out of her room yet."

"Even if you tell that to me…"

"Kohai-kun is on Mashiron duty!"

If it was something that he could do something about, he would've done it already.

However, since there wasn't anything that he was able to do, he couldn't do anything about it.

“If she’s stuck inside without eating, she might die! Mashiro is too thin! She’s weak!”

“Ok.”

Sorata answered back and went up stairs without changing.

Misaki, being considerate towards him, didn’t follow Sorata.

Mashiro’s door felt unwelcoming to Sorata.

His hand that was about to knock stopped.

His mouth that was about to talk froze.

What should he say? How should he say it? Even after racking his brain for something suitable to say, he couldn ’t think of anything sensible to say. He had nothing. He couldn’t think of anything.

Mashiro became silent when she heard about the result .

But she would've been upset for sure. She sacrificed her sleeping time on it. She probably had the confidence to win a prize. On the Tanabata, she said that she was able to do it with her own strength.

Ah, that must be it. That was why she was upset. She was surely upset.

Harder you work on something, more that it hurts when it fails. The time spent, the care taken and the high expectation on a work will come crashing down if it was to fail.

Only those who were able to take on that big risk had the right to challenge. Those who think of the failure first and become afraid of getting hurt; afraid of knowing the truth; refuse to know their limits and think of it as a waste of time, won't be able to stand on the same stage as someone like Mashiro.

If you had done it half-assed, then you could give an excuse to yourself. Mashiro Shiina blocked that escape path, so that she could only blame herself if she failed. She knew that she might not pass, but nevertheless, she still fought for that prize.

Doing your best won't guarantee a reward. At the same time, since there were people who do their best, those people make the competition get harder and more competitive, becoming Mashiro's rivals.

The world was like that.

It wasn't a world where two people are able to win holding hands.

There could be only one number one.

It was obvious that someone like Sorata who had been watching from the sidelines wasn't able to say anything. What can a spectator say? He couldn't put on an understanding face and pretend to sympathise; that would be stupid of him. Unsightly is a word that would describe him perfectly if he did so.

Since she tried her best, it can't be helped.

You can try again.

It's alright, there's always next time.

There was no way these comments would be helpful to Mashiro. Never.

Mashiro knew that already. Without anyone telling her , she knew it better than them. The reason why it hurt and she knew the worth of that pain. She wouldn’t share it with Sorata. Everything including the memories of the failure belonged to Mashiro.

The hand that was about to knock started to shake.

He kept his mouth shut. If he didn’t he thought that he might cry out.

What was I doing? What did I do while I was watching Mashiro? He could only think of the negative things that he’d done.

He really wasn’t helpful at all.

His emotions started to thrash about.

His heart was in prickling pain

Knowing all this couldn’t make him just stand still.

“… Damn it, I just need to do it!”

Saying that out loud, Sorata realized that he was smiling.

He couldn’t press down his feeling any longer.

Standing in front of the door won’t start anything. Nothing will change. Mashiro won’t be able to hear anything here. He had to step into the room to speak to her. Right now, it was somewhere far away, but if he ran, he will be able to get there.

With a stomp, he accelerated from the 2nd floor to his room. He searched his bag. He took out the career survey form. With his hand shaking in excitement, he started to write in the words that he only imagined about.

Shoving the form back to his bag, Sorata ran out of the door.

“Ah~, Kohai-kun!”

“I’m going to school! I’ll be back soon!”

Sorata ran to the second floor to the teacher’s office and without knocking, he slammed the door open.

A few teachers squealed in surprise.

Before any of the teachers could talk to him, Sorata walked towards Chihiro who was sitting on her chair.

“You look hot.”

His breathing was irregular and his school uniform was stuck to his body and his sweat was dripping on to the floor.

Looking bored, Chihiro extended her arm as if she was treating a dog and asked.

“You’ve brought it right? Career survey form.”

For some reason, Sorata became happy and smiled.

“Stop smiling and hand it over.”

He took out a crumpled sheet of paper.

Chihiro took a glance at it and placed it inside a paperwork folder.

“So you’ve wrote 「If it’s compulsory to say it, further studies. Well, I guess I should be happy with this for now .”

"Thank you."

"But the degree for contents design in the media facility is too much for your grades even with the escalator system.[52]"

"I'll study."

His breathing started to come back to its usual pace.

"Do you think that you'll be able to do it?"

"If I can't, I'll sit an external test."

"I see. Well then do you best. You can go now."

Bowing in response, Sorata sprinted back to the dorm.

When he came back to Sakurasou, Jin's shoes were at the doorway.

From the kitchen, he could hear some voices. It was probably Misaki or Jin.

He went upstairs to Mashiro's room and stood in front of the door once more.

He gathered his breath, but his body that was begging for oxygen wouldn't calm down.

His sweat drops were falling. He was dying because of the heat. But he didn't have the intention to put Mashiro behind on his priorities. He only had that thought in his head.

The closed door was unwelcoming Sorata.

But for some reason, it felt more welcoming than before.

Sorata leaned back on the wall with his legs stretched out and sat down facing the door.

"Shiina?"

There was no answer. The door kept shut and kept its silence.

"Are you asleep?"

Then there was no point talking. There was no way she would answer back if she was sleeping. Sorata slightly laughed at his stupidness.

"Well, that doesn't matter."

He only had that thought. Whether she was sleeping, awake, ignoring or listening, that didn't matter.

"I'm talking to myself, so you don't have to answer back."

That's right; it's alright even if I'm talking to myself.

"It might not mean much, but I handed in my career survey form. I was the last one."

He felt lassitude on his legs, but it felt good. He ran at full speed for the first time in a while. To do one's best at something was good.

"I'll go to you. I'll study to do the things that I want to do."

There was no response. She might really be sleeping.

"I'm also thinking about learning how to make games. I always had the interest, but I was too afraid."

And also, somewhere inside him, he didn't want to do his best at something.

He knew that it would be good for him, and it was thanks to Mashiro that he was able to make that decision.

"I'm going to have a try at the game audition. It's thanks to you that I'm able to think like this."

Silently, Sorata spoke for the last time.

"That's it… Sorry, for saying all that weird stuff."

He got up and looked at Mashiro's door for a while.

It wasn't like he was expecting anything. Sorata didn't think of what he said to be that meaningful for Mashiro. He hasn't actually started anything yet. He didn't leap out from the starting line.

So he couldn't really expect anything.

The door didn't even move.

This was the reality.

It was painful, but he had to deal with it. Mashiro would be in a greater pain than his.

Sorata started to drag his feet downstairs. At that moment, Mashiro's door slowly opened from the inside.

Sorata stopped and froze with his mouth wide open. The view that came into his eyes was Mashiro's room in a state which he didn't imagine it to be in.

He thought that the room would be dark.

He imagined her in her bed crestfallen hugging her knees.

He thought that her eyes would still be puffed up because of all the crying.

But all that thoughts were all wrong.

What Sorata saw was a white world.

The floor was covered in her clothes and on top of that was printouts of her names.

There weren't just a few pages of names. He could tell by the amount there was on the floor. A two digit

number would be an underestimate. All of them were pages that Sorata had never seen before. They were new pages.

In the middle of that stood Mashiro, she was looking at Sorata, but looked further than that. She was looking towards tomorrow. She chose her next goal. She wasn't disturbed at all. I will win the next prize. I will win it for sure. That was what her clear eyes were saying.

That's right. He had forgotten something very important. The tenant who lived in Sakurasou room 202 was Mashiro Shiina. She was a wolf in sheep's clothing. She walked the path that she'd chosen and she got the things that she wanted with her own strength. She was a beast who had nothing but the determination to succeed.

Even if she was to get hurt, she would shake it off and bounce back up. Mashiro knew it already. Only her efforts were needed to succeed.

"Sorata, I'll win it next time."

"I know."

He could only put on a bitter smile. He felt like he'd done something significant, getting all sweaty in the

process, but in comparison to Mashiro Shiina, it was nothing. He didn't do anything at all; Mashiro was too far ahead of him.

He didn't want to lose.

That thought suddenly blossomed in his heart.

He decided to treasure that thought in his heart.

Who knows, he might be able to catch up to her someday. No, he will catch up to her. To understand Mashiro's joy and pain, he had no choice but to catch up. To talk on the same level as her, it was somewhere far away, but he had to get there one day.

"Sorata."

"What?"

Mashiro's stomach suddenly growled.

"I'm so hungry."

"Well if you haven't eaten for the whole day, then it's normal."

Mashiro's leg suddenly lost its strength and she sat down.

"Hey, are you alright?"

"… I feel good. It's strange."

"You sure you're alright?"

He avoided the names and walked towards Mashiro.

Mashiro's stomach growled once more.

"Sorata, food."

"I know."

When he was helping her to get up, Mashiro's phone rang. Sorata dug around the pile of clothes and names and passed the phone to her. On the screen it said 「Ayano on it. It was her editor.

With a voice that had no emotions, Mashiro answered her phone.

Yes, yes. While talking on the phone, Mashiro's eyes suddenly lit up with surprise.

When she hung up, she looked powerless.

Sorata closed her phone for her.

“What did she say?”

Mashiro’s eyes that were out of focus looked towards Sorata. She looked at him and blinked a few times.

“Sorata.”

Her voice was hollow for some reason. Before he could ask if she was ok, she ran to him. It was too sudden, so he couldn’t catch her properly. Mashiro wrapped her arms around Sorata and fell to the ground.

The sheets of paper floated up and fluttered down. Sorata was enjoying Mashiro’s body heat watching the unusual sight.

He could feel Mashiro’s heartbeat. The mixed smell of shampoo and sweat pierced his nose.

It felt like he had a thick blanket on top of him and he felt comfortable and nervous at the same time. He couldn ’t speak even if he wanted to.

He had a similar experience before, but this couldn't be compared to what had happened before. It was because he could feel Mashiro more.

His body wasn't able to not react.

"… Shiina?"

He squeezed out the name that he'd gotten used to.

He could feel Mashiro's arms that were shaking as if she was trying to hold something back.

She was shaking in a way he didn't recognise. It wasn't because she was scared or cold. It wasn't because of anger either. Then what was it? What other reasons did people shake?

"Sorata…"

"What happened?"

At the fair voice, Sorata desperately used a gentle voice.

"It was Ayano."

"I could tell."

"I got told off…"

"For what?"

"To pick up the phone. She said I should listen to the end."

He checked Mashiro's phone and it showed that it had over 30 missed calls. Was there something that had to be said so urgently after it didn't qualify?

"Apart from that?"

"She told me why it didn't qualify."

Her voice was shaking. Sorata couldn't think of a reason why it didn't qualify.

"What did the editor say?"

"She said that it's going to be printed in next month's issue."

His heart started to beat so fast that it hurt.

"Someone was unable to finish their manuscript, so in their place…"

"I see."

Both of his arms wanted to hug Mashiro tightly.

"If it's this manuscript, then it doesn't need really need an award. That's what the editors had said…"

"What… so it was like that."

So that was why it didn't qualify. It didn't need to, because it was good enough to debut.

"I didn't listen to what she was saying…"

"Really, you're really good at surprising people."

"I feel somewhat strange."

"Why?"

He could hear that Mashiro was trying to show off slightly, but he wanted her to continue so he nudged her on.

"I'm happy but I'm crying."

"People are just made that way."

When Mashiro sat up, her tears started to flow. Her expression didn't change, but her tears ran down her cheeks and fell.

"Congratulations."

Mashiro wasn't able to speak so she nodded her head a few times, still crying.

He thought to himself I'll let her sit on my stomach until she stops crying, but at that moment, party poppers went off on top of his head. Streams of paper fluttered down and made Mashiro's white room colourful.

There was only one that would do something like this.

"Mashiron, congratulations on your debut!"

"Congratulations."

"Yeah, congratulation."

But today, there were three people. Standing next to Misaki was Jin and Chihiro who must've come back a while ago.

Laying flat on his back, he looked up at each of them.

He had a bad feeling about it.

How did they appear at such a good time? How did they know about Mashiro's debut? Setting off the party poppers as well…

"Ehh… Can I ask a question?"

The 3 pairs of eyes asked him to go on.

"When did you start listening?"

"From 「I'm talking to myself, so you don't have to answer back bit?"

"You've been listing from the start!"

This is the worst…

Just thinking about it made him wanting to kill himself . He said some pretty embarrassing lines in the prime time of his youth.

“「I'll study to do the things that I want to do..”

Misaki threw salt at his wounds by saying that in a weird way.

“I'm begging you, please stop! I want to kill myself! I might really die!”

Misaki tried to speak further, but Jin stopped her. But he was clearly holding back his smile.

“Wow~ that was really fun to watch.”

“I forbid you to look at me like that!”

Actually, it would be better if they didn't say anything at all.

“See, if everyone agreed to my motion of having no romance inside the dorm, then you wouldn't feel that pain.”

He couldn't laugh at all. Sorata's energy was drained.

"Well then, I'll get some groceries. You can cook, Misaki."

"We'll live it up tonight~. It's a party to celebrate Mashiro's debut!"

Misaki ran after Jin who headed downstairs, and Chihiro followed them.

"Ah~, Mikata, get some beers as well. 3 dozens would do."

He didn't have the strength to say that that was too much.

He asked Mashiro to move and Sorata got up.

Thinking that he should help Jin with the shopping, he tried to leave the room, but Mashiro tried to follow him, so he gave up.

"Shiina should get changed first."

He averted his gaze and tried to stop Mashiro. Even inside the dorms, her pyjama was too defenceless.

He went out of the room and closed the door behind him.

But after about 10 seconds, it opened again from the inside.

“Sorata, which clothes?”

She took off her clothes from the lower half, and he was able to see her white legs. Because of the pyjama top, he was unable to see her panties, but he wasn’t sure as to where he should be looking at.

“Say that before you strip!”

Sorata became too embarrassed and turned his head around.

Watching Sorata, Mashiro looked at herself and pulled her top down. She tried to pull it down as much as she could to cover her legs. Slightly bending forward, Mashiro stared that Sorata. As if she was shy, she puffed up her cheeks and said.

“Hurry up and pick the clothes for me.”

“Huh? Ah, yeah, right.”

Seeing an unexpected response, Sorata hesitated a bit and pointed at a black one piece.

“Wear a white t-shirt underneath that.”

“What about my panties?”

“You’re wearing them!”

“…”

She averted her eyes and slightly shook her head.

“You took them off as well!”

“Hurry up and choose one for me.”

Mashiro’s cheeks became slightly pink.

“Then wear that black one with the lace.”

He was about to give up.

“I’ll get changed.”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t look.”

"I won't look!"

Sorata shut the door as he said it.

What was that about?

He'd never seen Mashiro act like that. The pouted lips. Averting her gaze. The image of her blushing face was stuck in his brain and it wouldn't go away. Was she nervous? No, there was no way. Mashiro Shiina being shy, especially in front of Sorata was almost as unreal as the earth blowing up. She had to ask for Sorata's advice on what panties she was supposed to wear each day. But if so, what was that about just now.

His worries wouldn't go away. To lower his heart rate, he took deep breaths numerous times before Mashiro came out.

After 5 minutes had passed, Mashiro was finally changed and she came out of her room. Surprisingly her messy hair was now combed and neat.

He stared at Mashiro's face by reflex.

"What?"

“Nothing…”

From Mashiro the embarrassment from before couldn’t be felt. Was he seeing things before?

“Hey Shiina.”

She asked why from the side.

“I’m repeating myself, but really, congratulations.”

“Yeah… thank you.”

She averted her gaze from Sorata again in a shy manner.

“Hey Sorata?”

“Yeah?”

“I have a request.”

“Are you going to ask for a present for your debut?”

“Say my name.”

“Shiina.”

"Not that."

"… Ehh."

Don't tell me she wanted me to say Mashiro[53]? Anyways, it was too sudden. But then again, Mashiro was always sudden to begin with.

"No, that's too much for me."

"Why?"

"I've never called a girl by her first name."

"You say Misaki though."

"That's an alien."

"Chihiro as well."

"That's an amazoness."

"What about me?"

"That's…"

He couldn't think of what to say.

"It's unfair."

"O, ok. I'll call you that next time."

"Now."

Mashiro stepped up to him and didn't look like she was going to back down. When she shortened the distance, he felt as if his brain was about to burst. Mashiro even looking at him made it hard for him to stay calm.

"Call me."

As Mashiro asked him again, Sorata had to give up. He really felt pitiful at himself.

Sorata silently took short breaths so that Mashiro wouldn't notice it. It was just calling each other by their first name. That was it. Saying that to himself, he held back his shaky voice and said.

"… Mashiro."

"I knew it."

"You knew what?"

"Can't say it."

Mashiro's reply was short as usual.

She was playing around with him. Playing with people with this attitude. However, Sorata didn't question about it. No, he couldn't question it.

His sight was captured by her. He wasn't able to do anything.

In front of Sorata's eyes was Mashiro, who didn't even smile when she heard about her debut, was smiling happily.

When he saw that, he knew that nothing really mattered.

He just wanted to see Mashiro smile. Sorata who was thinking that, a silent laughter could be heard in his ears. He turned around and saw Jin, Misaki and Chihiro who was hiding on the stairway looking at him.

"It's the prime time of his youth! It's your youth Sorata !"

Jin who was unable to hold it in any longer shouted.

"I shouldn't have looked. That was so cold; it gave me too much damage."

Chihiro started to rub her arms even when it wasn't cold.

Misaki who was standing in the centre was holding a large amount of party poppers. Jin helped her to pull the strings.

"Eat this, Kohai-kun!"

Before he could say stop, there was a bang noise and Sorata and Mashiro was covered in pieces of paper.

"What happened to the shopping and the cooking preparation!"

"We looked at the roster, but this week's shopping duty is Kohai-kun, and the cooking duty was also Kohai-kun!"

"You should've done it for me by reading the mood!"

"That's that, and this is this."

Chihiro said coldly.

“Sorata.”

Mashiro pulled at his sleeves.

“I’ll go shopping instead.”

“I’ll just go myself.”

As usual, Sakurasou was noisy.

Over here, that was the standard.

There was a joyous event to be remembered about, and something else will happen tomorrow for sure. And the day after that as well. And the week after, and the month after and so on. There will always be something interesting going on.

After all, the place Sorata lived in was Sakurasou.

<End of Book 1>

Author's Notes

To those I've never met before: Nice to meet you.

To those I've met before: Long time no see.

With the start of the year I was able to start a new series.

I would like to write down my resolutions for the New Year, but it's only the middle of November, so I can't even feel the Christmas spirits yet, let alone the New Year's resolutions. I haven't even taken out the coats yet.

If I was to say "Next year, I'll~" the spirits would laugh at me. It agitates me to think that I would be laughed at by spirits that I don't even know, so I won't say anything unnecessary.

Anyways, how did you like "Sakurasou no Pet na Kanojo"? I would be happy if you enjoyed it.

This time, there are neither battles in space nor are there battles with special powers. There are neither murder cases nor girls dropping from the sky randomly.

Don't expect beams coming out from their eyes either. The world doesn't get rescued. Actually, the world isn't even in danger in the first place.

So what is this story about?

It's just your normal… well, not too normal teenagers who are enjoying their colour- and youthful life. Probably.

To be honest, the idea for this novel had been in my mind for quite a while. It was always on my "hopeful writing topics"-list. I'm very happy that I was able to write and publish it as a book like this.

And as I write this, I would like to thank the many people who have helped me to publish this book. Thanks to your help, the book was able to be sold without a hitch .

Many thanks to Keeji Mizoguchi for the wonderful illustrations. And thanks to my editor Araki.

I hope to see you all again in the next volume.

Hajime Kamoshida

References

1. ↑ **Sakurasou**: Lit. "Sakura Dormitory".
2. ↑ **Tatami**: A type of mat used as a flooring material in traditional Japanese style rooms.
3. ↑ These are the names of shinkansen trains ("super express" or "bullet train").
4. ↑ **Sakurasou**: Lit.: "Sakura Dormitory".
5. ↑ **Koshien** (甲): Koshien is the location of Koshien Stadium, where the Japan National High School Baseball Tournament is held.
6. ↑ **Inter High**: National Inter High School Sports Meeting.
7. ↑ **Prefrontal Lobe**: The prefrontal cortex (PFC) is the anterior part of the brain's frontal lobes, lying in front of the motor and premotor areas. This brain region has been implicated in planning complex cognitive behaviour, expression of personality, decision making and moderating social behaviour.
8. ↑ **Senpai**: Senpai is roughly equivalent to the Western concept of a mentor, though it does not imply as strong a relationship as what the word means in the West. More simply, it may translate as "senior".
9. ↑ **BWH**: BWH is the abbreviation for a woman's measurement, namely: Bust, waist, and hip.

10. ↑ **Crosstalk**: Crosstalk is a traditional Chinese comedic performance in the form of a dialogue between two performers, or a solo monologue, or a multiple persons talk show. The language, rich in puns and allusions, is delivered in a rapid, bantering style.
11. ↑ **Sumo Stable**: Sumo stables are organizations, which train sumo wrestlers in Japan. Each sumo wrestler should belong to a sumo stable. Otherwise, he cannot formally take part in a match. Sumo wrestlers live a group life with other sumo wrestlers in the stable while they are trained.
12. ↑ **Me**: "Me" sounds similar to "loincloth" and " scrubbing brush" in Japanese.
13. ↑ **Spongy Muscle**: Corpus cavernosum; also called " cavernous body of penis".
14. ↑ **Kouhai**: Kouhai is roughly equivalent to protégé, though it does not imply as strong a relationship as what the word means in the West. More simply, it may be translated as "junior/underclassman".
15. ↑ **The Night Butterfly**: "The Night Butterfly" is a movie about some women living in the Ginza (银) Hotel.
16. ↑ **Nryana**: An ancient Indian deity which has great power and strength.

17. ↑ **Mentaiko** (明): Cod roes flavoured with red pepper sauce.
18. ↑ **Hawks**: Fukuoko softbankhawks is a Japanese professional baseball team.
19. ↑ **Onii-chan**: One of many Japanese terms used to refer to an elder brother or elder male cousin or by younger kids to refer to any elder male as a form of respect. Please note that the Japanese language carries different ways of referring to the same relative, each carrying different levels of affection, respect, and so on. Therefore this has been left as it is.
20. ↑ **Iriomote cat**: An endangered subspecies of the leopard cat, native in Japan.
21. ↑ **Iridescent**: Property of a surface that changes colour when seen from different angles.
22. ↑ **Akimbo**: Body position where both hands are placed on the sides of the waist.
23. ↑ **Baumkuchen**: Some kind of sweet.[1]
24. ↑ **Are quote similar**: The way "not wearing underwear" and "notebooks" are written here, look similar.
25. ↑ **Maharaja**: A Sanskrit title for a "great king" or " high king".[2]
26. ↑ **Bento**: A meal in a box, meant to be carried around.[3]

27. ↑ If a soldier goes into war, it's possible that he dies, so it is better to propose after the "foreshadowing of death" is over, or it'll hurt the living one even more.
28. ↑ **Yamato Nadeshiko**: It describes a kind of Japanese woman.[4]
29. ↑ **Abyssinian**: Can be seen here.
30. ↑ **Seiyuu**: Voice actress/actor, the ones you hear in anime.
31. ↑ **Mangaka**: Manga artist.
32. ↑ **Golden Week**: National holiday in Japan.
33. ↑ **Hinamatsuri**: Girl's Day, a holiday on March 3rd.
34. ↑ A mythical creature in Japan that is known to like cucumbers
35. ↑ Red bean rice eaten when there's something to celebrate
36. ↑ He said "STOP" in English
37. ↑ Spelt like this: 空
38. ↑ Spelt like this: 空
39. ↑ Spelt like this: 空
40. ↑ Manga manuscript
41. ↑ The final draft of a manga
42. ↑ One of the soccer rules
43. ↑ Not wearing panties
44. ↑ Approx $120,000 USD
45. ↑ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Capybara

46. ↑ A programming language- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/C_(programming_language)
47. ↑ One of the most basic things that you learn when you start programming. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hello_world_program
48. ↑ Traditional Japanese Clothing
49. ↑ Not the guy from One Piece, but a traditional Japanese clothing worn mostly by males and small children
50. ↑ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tanabata#Customs
51. ↑ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marine_Day
52. ↑ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Escalator_school
53. ↑ Unless you didn't know, in Japan, calling each other by their first name is only done between close friends, lovers and family.